

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS—MAKING IT WORK

By Robin Brunet

All photos: Brian Demelty



The theme of the 76th Annual Truck Loggers Association convention, “Making it Work,” encompassed everything from wildfire fighting to the impact of cannabis legalization; but on January 18, one of the last presentations of the three-day event got to the heart of what ‘making it work’ really means for those struggling to prevail in an enormously challenging industry.

“Working Relationships—Making it Work” saw four respected industry veterans discuss how they are overcoming one of the biggest problems plaguing the forestry sector: the relationships between contractors and major licensees. And while some of their solutions involved a commitment to technology and complex operational procedures, they agreed that the most effective solutions are the simplest—as summarized by Kevin Horsnell, vice president of woodlands for Canfor, who endeared delegates by espousing the virtues of “meetings over eggs.”

Horsnell, whose presentation followed that of Lennard Joe, general manager of Stuwix Resources Ltd., pointed out that since Canfor is responsible for delivering 15 million cubic metres of wood to its 13 primary manufacturing facilities in

Western Canada, “we rely totally on our contractors. The relationship between contractors and licensees is incredibly important, and we put in a lot of time and effort into making sure we’re successful.”

Horsnell said that what his contractors want the most “is a plan, an entire winter plan, so they can determine their activities and make themselves efficient. So, we have a goal at every operation to get two years of wood under permit. We’re not always successful, but we do get enough for our contractors.”

He added that developing these plans so they match the equipment owned by contractors is crucial in maintaining productive contractor/licensee relationships.

Other elements that have fortified relationships at Canfor include making the corporation’s fuel rates available to contractors; maintaining a comprehensive benefits and pension program; and maintaining multiple reloads in all BC operations, which lengthens the hauling season and allows contractors to expand their ability to generate an even flow of revenue.

As for technology enhancing contractor/licensee relationships, Canfor has worked extensively with FPInnovations

to achieve proper layouts of winch assist systems, which Horsnell said will help his company consume about two million cubic metres of harvestable wood within two years. Canfor is also interested in exploring the full potential of machine telematics, again using FPInnovations as a resource.

However, Horsnell suggested that of all the initiatives undertaken by Canfor over the years, nothing can replace “meetings over eggs”—i.e.: sitting down and talking informally—as a fundamental way to develop and maintain a meaningful bond between the contractor and licensee. “At least once every quarter you need to go have breakfast with your contractor and just talk about the business,” he said. “That way, you’re able to head off things before they become a real issue.

“It’s the one thing I would encourage our people to do the most.”

What resonated for contractors about Horsnell’s comments was that there is a need to educate their younger contract managers on dealing with contractors. For instance, rate model outputs are not gospel, but need to be modified for the specific situation.



president of Fort St. John-based Surerus Pipeline Inc., explained that as one of the largest pipeline contractors in Canada, his company develops access, clearing, grading and reclamation plans in order to construct pipelines for some of the world's biggest energy companies.

He said that in his realm, "part of a sustainable contracting relationship is being able to understand what owners need to deliver and what their commitments are, and marry them to our business. If we're not on the same page as them on how we're going to deliver on safety and quality or work with indigenous communities, we're going to be unsuccessful."

Another relationship crucial to Surerus Pipeline is between the company and clearing contractors. "They are key," Surerus said. "Clearing is the first and largest contract for us and can easily be worth \$30 million. We hire lots of local people, and we do not low ball—it's too important, given that we must build trust with local communities."

The closing question and answer session between the speakers and moderator Brian Mulvihill (manager of forest products at Finning Canada) saw more advice being given on how to strengthen the ties between contractors and licensees. However, Dale Ewers arguably summarized the best philosophical approach—as well as at the same time illustrated the difficulty—in making the relationship work.

He concluded, "If you want something from somebody, first you have to give it. And that's a big problem in the forest industry: somebody has to start the process. In New Zealand it started with the forest companies: they gave me something, and I gave back, and it built from there."▲

Dale Ewers, managing director of New Zealand-based DC Equipment (whose mission is to create a safer and more productive steep slope logging industry), agreed strongly with Horsnell's emphasis on simple two-way communication. Keeping his presentation short, he noted that his approach to worker relations in his organization was to "treat everyone as a family."

He also emphasized the importance of listening rather than speaking: "That's why you have two ears and one mouth."

All of this came on the heels of Leonard Joe's take on the importance of communication and listening, especially with regards to new relationships being forged between forestry companies and First Nations, and how the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) will affect this dynamic (for the record, UNDRIP moves Canada away from the consultative model and into a consent model, meaning First Nations must give consent to any industrial initiative that may involve them before government can give approval).

Joe said that while some of the outcomes of UNDRIP could be "take-backs or an acquisition of tenures, I look at it as an opportunity to start new businesses. First Nations should be looked at as possible partners...you have a really good resource in your communities with First Nations, and the environment is going to make it even more attractive."

Joe went on to describe the responsibilities of First Nations in building

relationships and business opportunities. "It's my job to create an environment that will attract investment," and on that score he used Stuwix Resources Ltd. (which, since starting harvesting and forest management operations in 2005, has harvested 2.6 million cubic metres of timber and planted over eight million trees) as an example of a company that strives to use every piece of wood.

Indeed, the Merritt-based firm, which is jointly owned and operated by eight First Nation Bands in the Nlaka'pamux and Syilx territories, started the first grinding program in the region, launched a chipping program, and is now working on programs that will help the province reduce burnings and emissions. "Every time you utilize fibre, you're creating a job," said Joe.

The fourth speaker to share his thoughts about working relationships was an outsider to the forestry world. Sean Surerus,



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