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Bunching in the Bay

TRM Cutting fills demand for mechanized cutting in Oregon's Bay Area

Tony Meline lives in Coos Bay, a town of about 16,000 along Oregon's southern coast. He wouldn't live anywhere else but jokes that "We're like the last place in the world to do anything modern." If it's true, then Meline is a pioneer of sorts. He was one of the first Oregon Bay Area loggers to buy a feller buncher.

Meline, 45, started hand falling timber for his dad when he was still in high school. In 1988, they formed TRM Cutting; Meline took over the business when his dad retired.

The Bay Area is rugged and rocky — generally not conducive to mechanized cutting. About 10 years ago, however, timber that was growing on what Meline calls "good ground" came due for harvesting. "Good ground" is anything up to a 40 percent slope where he can run a feller buncher. "We push it to 60 percent sometimes," he says.

To meet the need for mechanized falling, people were bringing in feller bunchers from the Willamette Valley, a couple hundred miles away. At the time, Meline was contracting for Weyerhaeuser, so he asked the company if he could get their feller buncher work if he bought a machine. "The harvest manager said he would put me to work. He liked the idea of keeping the work with local people." In 1999, Meline bought his first feller buncher, a Timbco, and he bought another one year later.

He hired an operator for one machine and ran the other one himself until he and a partner started another business. The demands of running the new business, Riverside Logging, took him out of the driver's seat.

Downsizing to One

In 2003, he traded both Timbcos for a Cat TK732. He downsized to one machine primarily because of employee troubles. "I got tired of fighting with



Tony Meline says "good ground" for harvesting is anything up to a 40% slope where he can run his feller buncher. He bought his first in 1999.

operators, so I just went to one machine," he says.

Last February, he traded in the TK732 for the new Cat 532 track feller buncher with a Quadco 24-in. head. "The new 532 is a top-notch machine. It's an animal," he says. "The travel power and multi-functioning are really strong, and the hydraulics are smooth. I can travel, cut a tree at the same time and spin around, and nothing slows down. It is night and day compared to the 732 buncher." You

can hear pride in his voice when Meline says this, because he actually deserves some of the credit for how the new Cat buncher turned out.

Input into Design

It all started when Mike Coiner with Peterson Machinery, headquartered in Eugene, Ore., brought out the 732 for Meline to demo. "I thought it had some pretty good features. It had a few things I didn't like, but Peterson and Cat were

working on them," says Meline. "Mike asked me if I was going to buy it and I said, 'Well, if you take care of me, I'll take it.' And that was the start of our relationship."

Meline worked closely with Cat engineers and Peterson. "The engineers rode with us and we showed them what the buncher needed to do. They went back and made the hydraulics work and changed all sorts of things."

As improvements were developed, Peterson made updates to Meline's 732. "Whenever they took my machine for updates, they brought me a machine to run. I never lost any time. I trusted Mike. He said they'd back me and they did. They bent over backwards and I have everything good in the world to say about Peterson Machinery."

Good Operator

As the buncher was upgraded, so was Meline's situation with operators. For the past three years, his feller buncher operator has been Chuck Laird, a cousin who also lives in Coos Bay. "He'd never run a buncher before, and I broke him in on it. He's a super guy," Meline says. Laird was also a big part of making the Cat feller buncher what it is today.

Meline reports he is happy with the production Laird gets with the buncher. "Chuck has a pretty accurate tree counter on the computer, and we keep track of what he's cutting on a daily basis. Depending on the terrain and the size of the trees, Laird will cut 25-40 truckloads a day on average."

Fuel consumption on the 532 is a couple gallons per hour less than what he got with the 732. To conserve as much as possible, Meline keeps the saw teeth sharp. "That really helps. When your hot saw has to keep stroking to build speed, you're pulling horsepower and burning more fuel."

One More Buncher

So what is Meline doing these days now that he has a new buncher and a

solid operator? "I'm the big kahuna," he says, laughing. "I spend most of my time running Riverside Logging and bidding on jobs."

Most of his cutting jobs are for King Logging in Myrtle Point, Ore., but he also does all of the cutting for TRM's sister company. He turns down buncher work all the time. "It's feast or famine. Too much work for one machine, but not enough for two."

He solved that problem recently by teaming up with a new logger who will subcontract for Meline. "It's a good deal for me, because I have a second buncher when I need it and a good deal for him, because he wants to have his own machine."

Biggest Challenge

With his buncher operator problems behind him, Meline says these days the biggest challenge is finding enough hand cutters. He has three working for him all year but usually needs to hire more in the summer months when he gets more jobs.

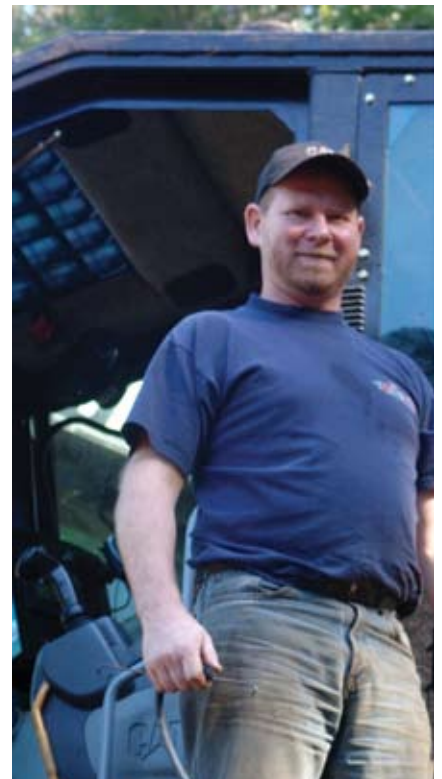
"There aren't the cutters there used to be. It's hard to find anybody that is good — period. They're out there, but they are getting older. There are new guys coming out, but any contractor will tell you that they want a paycheck, but they don't have the same work ethic," he laments.

Family

Meline and his wife, Marilee, have two sons and a daughter. His wife works fulltime for both companies as office manager and bookkeeper. She is also a part owner in TRM Cutting.

The kids, however, are not following in their parents' footsteps. "They have not shown any interest in the business and that is fine with me. The timber industry has changed so much, and it is a tough row to hoe. My kids have done really good in high school, and they are all going to go to college to become something important!" Meline laughs.

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532 for TRM Cutting. Depending the day, Laird will cut 25 to 40 truckloads a day.



Tony Meline, owner of TRM Cutting, says the machinery works fine — it's finding hand cutters that's the challenge. "They out there, but they're getting older."