

PMD Forestry gets ‘tree’-mendous support from Bell Swaziland

Petros Mnisi of PMD Forestry Total Harvesting Services in Swaziland knows firsthand how challenging the timber contract harvesting business can be, but working alongside his son Vusi, who is his operations manager, and having two Bell Loggers as hardworking assets, Petros is once again fuelling his passion for forestry.

Petros grew up in the Hhohho district near the Maguga Dam and spent his school holidays working as an inventory officer for the Mondi Group in the Piggs Peak area, taking down diameters and cubic metres of timber. “You could say I literally grew up in forestry and got to love everything about the industry,” he says. “After matric, I worked for the group for 18 months before they sent me off to Fort Cox in the Ciskei to study forestry.”

After graduating, Petros joined Mondi full time to work back his scholarship over a three-year period. By 1995, he had the urge to start his own business in timber harvesting and fortunately, an older colleague Tony Bold, cautioned him as to the many pitfalls there could be in the start-up of such a business.

“Tony understood what I wanted to do and he spent two years mentoring me in especially the correct way of applying for loans and I will forever be grateful to him for that,” Petros says. “I was also fortunate to have other mentors, John Ferguson and Tony Hulett, who taught me a lot about production and cable systems.”

Petros registered his company PMD Forestry Total Harvesting Services at the start of the new millennium



Charlie Boucher, of Bell Swaziland (right), and Petros Mnisi discuss the benefits of another Bell Logger.

and his former employer Mondi, assisted him in buying two used Skidders and two used Bell 220A Loggers from their fleet. Although used, they were in good running order and he could get started straight away, employing 45 people to fulfill contract-harvesting quotas granted to him by Mondi Forests.

Members of his teams worked as Skidder and Logger operators, fellers, log-scalers, cross-cutters, chalker-men and supervisors. “Things went well for us thanks in part to the contracts we were getting and the business grew in turnover, people and equipment,” Petros says. “In 2005, I joined forces with TLS, a long-haul timber transporting company. In timber harvesting, when you extract the timber and stack it at roadside, you only get paid once the timber crosses the weighbridge. My thinking was that by joining forces with Tommy Steven of TLS, we could get paid quicker as we could control how quickly the timber reached the weighbridge.”

The joint venture went well and there was rapid growth. According to Petros, the new company soon owned five Skidders and six cable machines and each of these machines needed a Bell Logger to assist with timber handling.

“I bought my first John Deere 360D Cable Skidder in 2002 and because of the terrain we mostly work in I have always only bought Cable Skidders. Bell Loggers sell themselves and are really the best machines to use for stacking, loading and sorting timber in Africa as they have been purposely designed and built for African conditions,” Petros enthuses. “They are such rugged machines.”

“Working with Bell Loggers in any size, you get used to the ease of operation and that they just always seem to be running, as was my experience first at Mondi and later in my own operations.”

Disaster struck the timber growing areas around Piggs Peak in 2007 when fires destroyed timber plantations running from west to east. Petros and his teams started harvesting the burnt timber immediately afterwards so that forestry owners could at least get something for their now damaged product. This harvesting continued without stopping from 2007 to 2010 when market demand suddenly dried up and no one wanted any more burnt timber.

“We stopped all our operations in 2011 and sold our equipment to defray expenses and repay loans to the banks,” Petros adds. “Soon after the fires of 2007, plantation owners started planting gum trees as these grow quicker than pine. So in October 2014 when adverts for contract harvesters started appearing, and my son Vusi was completing his forestry studies at Saasveld and showing a keen interest in timber harvesting, I suddenly sat up and took notice of the enquiries.”

Petros spells out the difficulty of restarting a timber contract harvesting business with no capital and no equipment. “We were delighted to be shortlisted for obtaining a contract but still, we had no equipment. Fortunately in the end, having a contract in hand and a business plan, we could confidently approach the likes of the Swazi Bank and the Industrial Development Corporation of Swaziland who assisted us with financing two Bell 225A Crank Boom Loggers.”

PMD Forestry Total Harvest Services now employ 35 people who extract mostly timber for use as transmission

poles where lengths vary between 12 and 7 metres. Shorter timber goes to mine support industries. Felling and extraction operations take place mainly in daylight due to safety concerns with some loading of long-haul trucks taking place at night.

Petros goes on to say that when he and Vusi were researching the market, they looked at other equipment besides those made and sold by Bell Equipment but in the end, decided to stay with equipment that they knew and trusted, equipment that had fully fledged technical and parts back-up on their doorstep in Swaziland and where the import duties had already been paid by Bell Equipment.

“We are tasked with producing 2 500 tonnes of timber a month and we’ve hired in a Skidder to help us with the task. The going is tough and we could really do with another two Bell Loggers but we need to stabilise our cash flow first. It’s also good to be associated with Charlie Boucher and his team at Bell Swaziland as they really look after us.”

