

J & B Timbers expands its mechanisation with Matriarch Skogger

A firm belief in the value of long-term relationships is proving its worth for a Swaziland-based timber harvesting contractor.

What makes the story intriguing is the fact that even though the contractor believes in job creation by using manual labour, selective use of innovative mechanisation is streamlining his operations, leading to steady growth in a competitive market.

Barend Steenkamp, the fifth generation of Steenkamps in Swaziland, along with his father Jan, owns J & B

Timbers. The family has for many years farmed in the Sicunusa area in the west of the country. They were some of the last farmers to close their dairy production and Barend, who has a tertiary qualification in agriculture, saw a gap in 2010 in the contract timber harvesting field. "We started out on a small-scale felling 300 tonnes per month using one chainsaw and an agricultural tractor-trailer combination with all handling and loading done using manual labour from the Rocks area near our farm," Barend says. "This was done for the Montigny timber group who later bought out all of Sappi's forests in Swaziland."

Over the next five years J & B Timbers showed steady growth and by 2015 the labour force had grown to 65 people. All felling, cross-cutting and loading was still being done by hand and at that time, Barend decided it was time to start mechanising. "We found a used Bell 125 Logger on the open market and in our ignorance, had it repaired using freelance mechanics who installed pirate parts, which soon caused the machine to break down during critical production times," he says. "We then contacted Charlie Boucher at Bell Equipment in Swaziland and despite it being close to Christmas of that year, we were warmly received as new customers of and more importantly, had our Bell Logger repaired and back in production quickly. This was the start of a long-term relationship that has benefited us greatly."

In March 2016 J & B Timbers bought its first new Bell 220A Teleboom Logger. "That machine made such a difference to our production as with two Bell Loggers we could now use one machine infield and another stacking timber at the roadside depot where it would also load timber onto trucks," Barend adds. "Soon after this, our clients Montigny, who are also keen on job creation, doubled our monthly production from 2 500 tonnes to 5 000 tonnes as they saw in us the potential to grow and create more jobs."

In the same year and some six months later, J & B Timbers took delivery of another new Bell 220A Teleboom Logger but replaced the Teleboom with a Crankboom, which has a higher reach and can be used to load timber onto larger trailers.

"We had been using the Matriarch 420 Timber Grab on our Bell Loggers and when our clients, Montigny, put out a contract in January 2017 to harvest pine thinnings, we were naturally interested although we now faced a new challenge of extracting bigger timber. Charlie Boucher arranged for us to meet Ashley Bell, Matriarch Equipment's Marketing Manager, and Derek Howe, Bell Equipment's General Manager: Forestry, Sugar and Agricultural Sales, to look at the Matriarch FASTfell and Skogger timber machines as possible solutions to our proposed thinnings harvesting."

A trip to see the Matriarch machines at work in forests in Tsitsikamma paid dividends and Barend decided that buying the Matriarch Skogger was the best way forward. "Our challenge was to get the felled timber to roadside and the Skogger, which fulfills a dual role of extracting the timber coupled with the ability to then stack it as well, seemed the obvious choice," he explains. "A big advantage of the Skogger is that we believe it will work equally well in thinnings as well as clear fell operations where it will haul gum in longer lengths, such as that which is destined for transmission poles."

J & B Timbers's operators have taken to the Matriarch Skogger with ease. Barend ascribes this to the ease of handling in the machine's design and with so many features he enthuses about. "First of all you have a low-revving engine and this in turn translates to fuel burn of around 7,2 litres an hour, which means a lower cost

per tonne of timber handled; a big plus. You then don't have to pre-bunch the timber as the Skogger does that automatically with its delicate grab. That same grab has a built-in scale to prevent overloading and it further features a re-grab effect of which the frequency can be set, which means the timber is held firmly during the extraction and stacking processes. A floating boom also retards the grabbing action."

Other features include low temperatures on the hydraulic oil which leads to longer component life, no wheel slip due to the presence of differentials and a transfer box and self-straightening of the articulated turn feature once a change of direction has been completed. Barend believes that the weight-to-power ratio is perfect and this should lead to longer tyre life.

"We would not be at this point without the backing, advice and support from Charlie and Nicolien Boucher at Bell Equipment in Swaziland," Barend says. We've confidently entered into a maintenance agreement with Bell Swaziland and rely totally on the company's expertise."

From humble beginnings, J & B Timbers has grown its contact timber harvesting operations in a planned and systematic way and while mechanisation has brought benefits, Barend believes that their support of their local community in creating jobs is key. The company's current labour force of 370 people fell and extract 9 000 tonnes of timber a month but equipment such as the Matriarch Skogger is certainly speeding things up.

Barend quotes a client who said of the Matriarch Skogger: "This machine is going to cause a revolution in the forestry industry" and we have reason to agree.



Team Leader of Bell Equipment Swaziland, Charlie Boucher, with Carmia and Barend Steenkamp of J & B Timbers.