

Somusa Forestry sold on Bell Timber Forwarder's safety features

Timber harvesting is a fascinating field and in Southern Africa it is an industry that is seeing ever growing mechanisation. Large machines are now felling and cross-cutting trees while stockpiling and loading timber onto interlinked rigs for haulage to sawmills and pulp and paper plants is totally mechanical.

An area often overlooked though is that of timber forwarding where the cut timber is extracted from within the compartment to the roadside and here Bell Equipment is fast making inroads with its Bell TF302E Timber Forwarder.

This has been the experience of Sefiso Bembe and Natt Pretorius, two experienced timber men who jointly own Somusa Forestry. "Somusa" is the Zulu word for "gratitude" and this modern South African company proudly boasts a Level 2 B-BBEE score. We met the partners at one of their larger sites near Lothair in Mpumalanga and while Sefiso oversaw a busy timber harvesting operation, Natt spoke to us.

"This business used to be called Ihlati Logging and belonged to my father-in-law, Eckardt Küsel, who contracted to the larger pulp and paper companies for some 28 years," he says. "When he retired, we bought the business from him and renamed it Somusa Forestry. This happened in 2018.

"With buying the business, we inherited some of the former company's forestry equipment and this included three Bell 225A Loggers and two Bell 1716A Tractor-trailer units. There was also a timber forwarder of which ours was the only one in South Africa, having been sent here as a demonstration model," Natt says. "The forwarder's manufacturer



Somusa Forestry partners, Sefiso Bembe and Natt Pretorius, with Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Daniel van Huyssteen.



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has since stopped making forestry equipment so spares and certain key replacement parts became a real problem to keep this machine running.

"I have fortunately, during my 30 years in forestry and its related industries, had lots of experience with timber handling machines designed, built and maintained by Bell Equipment. When we looked to replace our existing forwarder, I confidently turned to Bell Equipment and the company's knowledgeable Sales Representative, Daniel van Huyssteen, to see what they could offer us," he adds.

According to Natt, Bell Equipment arranged for him and Sefiso to visit the Bell factory in Richards Bay and to also call on Joseph Zulu and his company Siyawisa Hlathi in Zululand. Joseph owns and operates four Bell TF302E Timber Forwarders in both 4x4 and 6x6 versions and Natt and Sefiso were able to glean first-hand knowledge of how these innovative new trucks performed in terms of cycle times, infield loading and fuel consumption.

Armed with this knowledge and being assured that with Bell Equipment's large local footprint, technical backup and spares availability would not be a challenge, the partners ordered a Bell

TF302E Timber Forwarder, which was delivered in July 2020. "We had looked critically at the terrain where we do most of our work and with it being relatively flat, the Bell TF302E Timber Forwarder suits our application perfectly," Natt says. "Had the terrain been steeper, we would probably have opted for a John Deere purpose-built 1910E Forwarder."

Both Natt and Sefiso are excited about what they describe as a timber forwarder for a new generation. "You can see that with the Bell TF302E Timber Forwarder designed to CE and ISO quality and safety standards that Bell Equipment is thinking ahead. These are also standards that our similar thinking clients are insisting on so we're meeting standards all-round," Natt says. "We take safety very seriously and Bell Equipment's claim that the truck has "best-in-class braking" with its fail-to-safe braking system seems justified."

The same can be said of other standard safety features such as a retarder that benefits brake life, Hill Assist and rollback protection, which are all

appreciated despite the flat areas where Somusa Forestry mostly operates currently. The partners have noted the inclinometer which would offer instantaneous warnings of instability should they occur in compartments on steeper slopes or sharper turns with full loads.

"We're pleased to see that operator comfort has not been forgotten in the ergonomics of the cab," Natt adds. "The Bell TF302E Timber Forwarder has a better ground speed than a typical forwarder and we think this will offer the operator more comfort and cause less fatigue. The sealed switch module in the cab is a great innovation and we can see this working better in dusty environments than toggle switches."

The partners also speak highly of the Bell TF302E Timber Forwarder's broader bunk space which offers 30m³ of space over a length of 5,8m. This space easily accommodates the saw logs of up to 6,6m and shorter hauls to the roadside. The truck is fitted with a Waratah CF8 crane and a Matriarch 42LX grab with a capacity of 0,42m³.

Current sustained operations see the Bell TF302E Timber Forwarder clocking up 400 operational hours a month.

"It would be amiss if we didn't mention that we've been impressed with the truck's fuel consumption. Fuel consumption is a big factor when buying equipment and we have not been disappointed. We believe the Bell 6x6 TF302E Timber Forwarder is very competitively priced compared to other purpose-built forwarders and we're confident that Bell Equipment will soon be the market leader with this type of timber truck."

