

# Kobelco Excavators and Bell Loggers drive mechanisation at GDH Harvesting

**Excavators using hydraulic technology have come a long way since Sir WG Armstrong & Company first used water to drive an excavator when building the Hull docks in England back in 1882.**

Today excavators using hydraulic oil offer a safe and efficient option to a variety of industries as a leading timber harvesting contractor has found. Excavator-based cable-yarder systems have proved very popular in many parts of the world.

Geoff Good, a 30-year veteran of the contract timber harvesting industry, is the owner of GDH Harvesting with its headquarters in Sabie in Mpumalanga and a busy branch in Ugie, in the Eastern Cape.

“We’ve been operating in the Ugie area for the past 10 years, doing clear felling, extraction of steep and flat areas and processing of pine at roadside for our client, a large timber grower with plantations across the country,” Geoff Good says. “After a devastating fire swept through many of the company’s pine saw log compartments near Ugie during the winter of 2021, we were tasked with getting that burnt timber felled quickly to allow our client to still extract some value from it, selling it wet before the wood fibre starts losing its quality and therefore its value.”



To do this quickly, efficiently and above all safely, GDH Harvesting has committed a large part of its labour force of 80 people in the Ugie area to this effort. "Almost 65% of the people we employ at the Ugie operations are local and we have invested heavily in their training for the skills that we need, taking them from unskilled labour up to supervisory level so that we leave a solid legacy of skills in this area as part of our commitment to social upliftment," Geoff explains. "As is our normal way of working, focusing on efficiencies and safety, we're mechanising as much as possible for all our operations."

In April 2019, GDH Harvesting took delivery of a Kobelco SK260LC-10 Excavator fitted with a third-party timber felling head. Geoff says that they had chosen the Kobelco SK260LC-10 Excavator for its quality but importantly also for the fact that they could rely on technical backup from Bell Equipment, who sold the equipment range. "We've been dealing with Bell Equipment in Nelspruit for 30 years and knowing how the company works is a big plus for us," he says. "With Ugie being a bit isolated, we have the assurance that Bell Equipment is near enough in Mthatha to be able to service and repair our machines bought from the company."

By all accounts, the 26-ton Kobelco's performance has been impressive as it has clocked some 8 000 hours since its arrival in Ugie in 2019, felling and processing around 500 cubic-metres of pine timber a day in two shifts. The two daily shifts mean that the machine is used between 13 and 14 hours a day, reflecting high mechanical availabilities, and its fuel consumption of 16 litres an hour is well within the business plan.

Some timber compartments around Ugie are planted in steep areas, at times on ground with more than a 30% slope, and here Geoff and his teams have deployed a 30-ton Kobelco SK300LC-10 Excavator fitted with a shovel-yarder attachment from a third-party supplier. "Although the ideal weight excavator carrier would be a 35-ton machine, we've found the 30-ton Kobelco to be sufficiently stable and above all, delivers more than sufficient hydraulic pressure and flow to run the cable yarder system efficiently, quickly and safely," Geoff says. "We've retained the bucket on the Kobelco for stability and to help the machine create safe and level loading platforms."

Geoff points out that in contrast to traditional cable-yarding systems, excavators offer better stability due to their weight and can be moved easily without the added bother of re-establishing anchor cables. Their use creates a more efficient and safer system and the ease and speed with which timber is extracted from the steepest compartments makes for better production at lower costs.

"We've used one Kobelco SK300LC-10 Excavator in this way at our Ugie operations since January 2020 and in this period of around 22 months, it's given us just over 3 000 hours of really good production," Geoff says. "We recently replaced an older machine and again turned to Bell Equipment in Nelspruit where Daniel van Huyssteen, Bell Equipment's knowledgeable sales representative, who is also a qualified forester, assisted us with yet another Kobelco SK300LC-10 Excavator that we have converted to a shovel-yarder."

GDH Harvesting now has two Kobelco SK300LC-10 Excavator carriers outfitted as shovel-yarders to add to the one Kobelco SK260LC-10 with the timber-felling head, nine Bell Loggers and two John Deere 648 Grapple Skidders all deployed in the Ugie area alone.

"I should stress once again, that Bell Equipment's large service footprint played an important role in our decision to buy the Kobelco Excavators as carriers for the shovel-yarders as we're assured of a service centre nearby at Mthatha, and East London as backup even though it's a little further away," Geoff adds. "What adds to Bell Equipment's service though, and ensures we get the maximum uptime out of our equipment, are our own strict preventative maintenance schedules as overseen by Etienne Kruger, our mechanic and fleet manager in Ugie, who ensures that we do interim servicing with Bell Equipment's approval at 250 hours along with strict daily checks and constant lubrication on all our machines."

Amongst GDH Harvesting's nine Bell Loggers at the Ugie site, one stands out as being 'different' and Geoff explains why: "With the speed with which we fell and extract the whole trees using the Kobelcos, we needed a logger with a bit more grunt to keep ahead of the stacking and processing at roadside. We need to move some full tree lengths away from the Kobelcos which are then marked, crosscut and stacked. Bell Equipment arranged for a Bell 225F Turbo Logger on a demonstration basis, and we were so impressed by its performance that we promptly bought the demonstration machine. It offers around 10 horsepower more, has a teleboom that can be extended or retracted and is ideally suited for our purpose while still only using 7-litres of diesel an hour."

Geoff is adamant that mechanisation is the way to go in timber harvesting and having the correct tools for the job like Kobelco Excavators and Bell Loggers is non-negotiable.

