

Bell Forwarder streamlines operations for Buhle Betfu

Timber forwarding is often thought of as the unglamorous link in the timber supply chain. Felling trees, extracting and cross-cutting them gets the adrenaline going as it's mostly noisy and busy. However, before the timber reaches the long-haul transport, done by either road or rail, it must be moved from the roadside to a loading depot. This must happen continuously, efficiently, and above all, safely.



Buhle Betfu is essentially a transport company but one with a difference as it's a South African empowerment success story. Buhle Betfu evolved out of the well-established Cargo Carriers. The name Buhle Betfu means "our pride" in Siswati, the language of eSwatini (formerly Swaziland) and it's this pride which has carried it forward since its founding in 1986. The company's vision statement is "We are on the move" and, judging by its past successes that have been acknowledged with several awards, the pace of its movement is steadily increasing.

"Buhle Betfu operates in two industries namely sugar and timber," says Vinesh Gayaram, the company's Operations Manager. "Sugarcane transport, with the loading outsourced, is done with a 12-vehicle fleet in the Malelane and Komatipoort areas. In timber, we operate a 24-vehicle express fleet that supplies 80% of the timber that feeds a major pulp and paper mill west of Mbombela."

It is near this giant pulp and paper mill at Ndogwana in Mpumalanga that Buhle Betfu has its base for the timber haulage operation.



"We employ around 140 full-time staff and from here we cover the areas of Camelot North and South as well as Sudwala," Vinesh adds. "We're fortunate to have a low staff turnover and most of our employees have been here for a long time, which adds to our collective skills base."

Having timber handling and transport as its core business, the timber division of Buhle Boffu has since its inception made use of Bell Loggers to sort, stack, load, and unload the timber in its various forms. "Buhle Boffu has owned 15 Bell Loggers in various model sizes over the years with all of them being A-series machines apart from one newer Bell 225F series Logger," says Maurizio Spasimante, owner of Forest Trading, a company closely associated with Buhle Boffu, and which looks after the fleet's maintenance. "The company has been innovative with new technology and using a performance-based operations system has been self-regulatory in finding ways to carry larger payloads and speed up production."

The need to speed up production to provide a constant stream of timber to the pulp and paper mill was recently highlighted by Buhle Boffu's clients. They suggested that the company look at replacing previous all-wheel drive road trucks that were loaded using Bell Loggers with two specialised timber forwarders fitted with their own cranes. This would enable them to load and unload the timber independently during the forwarding process with the added advantage that it could include infield loading when that was required.

"What our clients wanted to see was a timber forwarder fitted with its own crane that could work independently of mechanised teams using Bell Loggers to load or unload timber, and this all in the name of keeping the timber supply to the mill flowing," says Johan van Zyl, Buhle Boffu's Shift Manager and someone who is constantly at the forefront of the production process. "The thought was too that should there be timber left in a compartment, a forwarder, being versatile and high enough off the ground to get over stumps, could also load infield and so speed up the supply process."

"While we researched the market thoroughly, our decision was made all the easier by what Bell Equipment's Sales Representative in Mbombela, Daniel van Huyssteen, a qualified forester with excellent product knowledge, could tell us," Vinesh adds. "Knowing Bell Equipment and the quality of their design and build, especially in their forestry-focused products, along with their excellent technical support, gave us the confidence to order a Bell TF302E Forwarder in January 2023."

The Bell TF302E Forwarder was delivered to Buhle Boffu in May 2023 and put straight to work. The operators, former truck drivers, took a while to get used to the seat swiveling through 180 degrees while using the onboard crane to load and unload the truck with timber.

The timber that Buhle Boffu transports is all cut to 2,4 metre length which the Bell TF302E Forwarder's crane handles easily with its maximum capacity of 1,65 tons. The teleboom extension has proved to be incredibly handy when certain types of timber more suitable for pulp may be stacked at the back of piles and the longer reach of the crane enables it to comfortably load selected logs.

The Bell TF302E Forwarder has twin bunks that are ideally suited to the 2,4-metre log lengths.

"The Bell TF302E Forwarder runs an average haul distance of 5km and while most of the roads we traverse are hard and solid, some can get very slippery in our long rainy season in Mpumalanga," Johan explains. "We believe that with the Bell Forwarder's even distribution of torque across all three axles, we will enjoy true 6x6 traction in all weather and underfoot conditions, and extended tyre life. The current fuel consumption of slightly over 13 litres an hour is fair, and we believe this will improve as our operators become more accustomed to the machine."

Buhle Boffu's Bell TF302E Forwarder has been bought with a standard warranty of 12 months or 2 500 hours. Both Maurizio and Workshop Manager, Pieter Woest, are of the opinion that it's easy to deal with Bell Equipment as you can talk to someone you know in the Nelspruit branch. "Bell, as a family business, is known for reaching out and ensuring each customer's machine delivers maximum uptime as they were designed to do," Maurizio says. "Buhle Boffu is a firm believer in the advantages of preventative maintenance and will fully familiarise its maintenance crews with the Bell TF302E Forwarders even while they are still under warranty."



(From left): Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Daniel van Huyssteen; Buhle Boffu Workshop Manager, Pieter Woest; Buhle Boffu Shift Manager, Johan van Zyl; Buhle Boffu Operations Manager, Vinesh Gayaram; Forest Trading Owner, Maurizio Spasimante, and Buhle Boffu Bell TF302E Operator, Louis Malomane.