

MTO upgrades aging fleet with new F-series Loggers

An upward growth spurt for a leading South African timber growing company has seen it turn to a preferred supplier of timber handling equipment to replace its fleet of older machines.

The MTO Group came into being out of a State-Owned Entity (SOE) that was a forestry group in the early 1990s. It has evolved from different investment groups and shown real growth since creating its own identity in 2005. MTO stands for 'Mountain to Ocean' and it's a very applicable name since its forests, especially those in the picturesque Tsitsikamma area of the Eastern Cape are often found in a thin belt between mountain tops and the nearby ocean.

As a timber grower, MTO operates in the Western and Eastern Cape and, since 2015, in the Mpumalanga Lowveld as well. It is here near White River that we find Dirk van Heerden, MTO Group's Maintenance Manager in the Lowveld and the person tasked with acquiring and maintaining mechanised forestry equipment that is used for a wide variety of tasks.

Dirk hails from Sabie where both his father and grandfather had worked in forestry, which means Dirk really is a chip off the proverbial old block.

"Here in the Mpumalanga area we grow mostly Eucalyptus species and we produce a variety of round log products into external value-adding facilities," he

says. "Some of the value-added products include pulp, board timber, sawn lumber, biomass, poles, mining timber, veneer, shutter-plywood, and shelving."

A visit to MTO's gum plantations near White River shows bustling clear-fell operations in progress with yellow Bell Loggers very much in evidence, extracting the felled timber and stacking it at the roadside where it is processed using chainsaws and cut into predetermined lengths.



"We've been using Bell 225 A-series Loggers for as long as I can remember and in September 2021, we started the process to replace some older models with the newer machines," Dirk says. "We researched the market thoroughly as there are a few players out there but we're happy to say that our choice once again fell on Bell Equipment's new F-series Logger. We're also grateful to Bell Equipment's Sales Representative, Daniel van Huyssteen, who as a forester, understands our business and the challenges we face."

According to Dirk, their plan is to retain a Logger for 10 000 to 12 000 hours before replacing it but some older models in their fleet had clocked in excess of 18 000 hours. "These Bell Loggers run to those high hours because they are easy to maintain and to rebuild if necessary. Bell also still stocks essential parts for the A-series such as hour meters and fuel pumps, and the company should be commended for showing such faith in an older design that they acknowledge its longevity."

MTO took delivery of three new Bell 225F Loggers in March 2022 and two more similar machines were delivered in June the same year in the Lowveld area.

"As you've seen, we're using three of these new Bell 225F Loggers infield with two others in our treatment and stockyard where they handle, stack, and load untreated and treated timber poles and other timber products."

Dirk and his colleagues are pleased to have the five new Bell Loggers working as with mounting production pressures they had to hire similar equipment that came at a cost, with much of that being fuel.

"These new Bell 225F Loggers with the Yanmar engines are so much lighter on fuel than the older A-series models," he says. "We're saving on average about 25% on our fuel burn with the new F-series Loggers, which amounts to a lot of money at the end of a financial year. What surprises us is that we're seeing this frugal fuel burn despite the Bell Loggers handling full tree lengths of up to 28 metres at times."

According to Dirk, their operators took to the new Bell 225F Loggers immediately and commented on how more responsive the controls were. The company has implemented strict daily pre-start checks and all operators know that preventative maintenance is key in successfully maintaining equipment to ensure longevity. Each Thursday is washday for the Bell Loggers and lubrication is done regularly.

Asked about maintenance and the level of service that MTO enjoys from Bell Equipment in nearby Nelspruit, Dirk says the following: "We had a few teething problems with the new machines as one can have but Bell Equipment is a mere phone call away and these niggles were fixed quickly and quietly with no questions asked."

"Looking to the future, upward-moving production targets see our company increasing harvesting capacity, which will increase our need to utilise three-wheel loggers going forward. We're busy evaluating the amount of new equipment we would need for our expansion and will be engaging with Bell Equipment to see if they can supply to our needs."



Daniel van Huyssteen (left) Bell Sales Representative with Dirk van Heerden, Maintenance Manager MTO Group Lowveld.

