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Tracking Loads

Caribou Software simplifies and streamlines procedures for Maine loggers.

LINCOLN, Me.

Let's face it. When it comes to adopting computerized technology, loggers as a general rule don't lead the charge. Even in the office, many logging companies are slow to embrace computerization. They may have embraced a computerized accounting system like Peachtree or Quickbooks to handle their overall financials, but when it comes to keeping up with load tickets, they often still rely on rudimentary spreadsheets at best, or worse yet, a #2 pencil and a 10-key adding machine.

That used to be the case with Robin Crawford and Son Woods Company, Inc., a 200,000-plus cords a year entity



headquartered in Lincoln, Me. In 2007 the company adopted Caribou Software's Logger's Edge program to help keep track of load tickets and streamline the trucker and crew payment process, not to mention the revenue reconciliation process. They even use the program to keep up with fuel purchases and to automate International Fuel Tax Agreement (IFTA) reporting each quarter.

With eight harvesting crews, one can imagine how time consuming it was to contend with the load ticket paperwork before Crawford had a software system. Crawford personnel estimate they have shaved at least two full days off the time they used to spend on paperwork.

Crawford has even gone so far as to automate tracking load tickets right from

the woods to the office. Caribou has a load ticket entry software system called Suzie Logger, designed specifically for use on a handheld computer at the job. Suzie Logger can either be used as a stand-alone system or can be integrated directly with The Logger's Edge office system. Crawford began using it in conjunction with The Logger's Edge in 2009.

Northwoods' Influence

Northwoods Management, the land management company for Great Northwoods Inc. and one of Crawford's main customers, was instrumental in equipping Crawford's loader operators with rugged handheld computers (Trimble Nomads). Crawford's loader operators use the devices to enter load ticket infor-



Each week Crawford's multiple crews develop many loads of different products and deliver them to various markets.

mation electronically for the timber they harvest for Northwoods.

Northwoods Management wanted an in-woods tracking system that would give them and their landowners added security in terms of ensuring that every load was properly tracked from the woods, right through to the mill settlement, and that GPS data could be produced to validate the exact time and location where each load originated. Another important attraction for Northwoods was the ability to reduce costs associated with the pre-printed, multi-copy load tickets.

Not surprisingly, the loader operators, who range in age from 33 to 56, were initially quite skeptical about the handhelds and were reluctant to accept the new technology. "Do you really think I'm going to be able to run one of these things?" asked loaderman Scott Drinkwater when he first learned of the new technology they were adopting. He was not comfortable with computers in the first place, and the last thing he wanted to have to do was use one to enter his loads in the woods. Now, Drinkwater, along with the other two loader operators who use the handhelds, love using the software and are practically lost if the printers are out of paper and they have to go back to the old manual tickets for a day.

They print multiple copies of the ticket to a portable, wireless printer for the trucker to take to the mill, eliminating the need to hand-write the tickets on pre-printed woods tickets. Once a week they download ticket information from the handheld onto a memory stick and drop it off either at the office or at one of Crawford's designated drop-off sites. These sticks come into the office on Monday morning and Tammy MacEachern, office manager for Crawford, simply uploads the tickets into her Logger's Edge system electronically, eliminating the need to re-key all the information manually.

While transferring data on a memory stick works well for the Crawford team, some companies upload the data from the handheld to their computer, and then e-mail the data to the office. Still others have a cellular connection in their handhelds, and when the loader operator drives into cell range, Suzie Logger will automatically send the file to a special

file server in the office, where it is immediately accessible to the office personnel.

Once tickets are in the system, it's a breeze for Tammy to enter the weights from the mill slips, and the process serves as an excellent double-check to ensure that she has a mill slip for every ticket that the loader operator loaded. Tammy says that the whole ticket data entry process used to take about 2.5 hours a week; now it's down to about 1.5 hours. Given how hectic Mondays are in the Crawford office, having a whole extra hour in the day is a real bonus. Now they are printing payroll for the truckers two or even three days before it's actually due. Plus, they are able to e-mail an electronic copy of load tickets to Northwood Management on Monday, which expedites Northwoods' process as well.



With Robin Crawford Sr. are, from left, Charlene Cram, Robin Crawford Jr., Tammy MacEachern and Melanie Crawford.

Other Suzie Logger users follow a slightly different process whereby the handheld operator enters the weight information onto the loads directly at the end of the day, when he receives a copy of the mill slip containing the weight information. It's easy for the loaderman to add this information, and that approach makes it even easier for the office personnel.

Northwoods Management has been instrumental in getting many of its other primary contractors onto Caribou's software systems. While some of them use both software systems in tandem, much like Crawford, others strictly use the Suzie Logger system to gather the field data electronically. Gerald Pelletier, Inc. in Millinocket, Me., (featured on the Discovery Channel's *American Loggers* show) uses the handheld on its harvesting jobs for Northwoods, and Reggie

Beaulieu, the office manager there, says receiving the load ticket information electronically (via e-mail from the loader operator at camp) has reduced the time it takes him to manage his load ticket data by about 30%.

Northwoods Management plays an active role in encouraging their contractors to invest in tools that will save them time and make them more accountable to the productivity and cost structure of their business. Chris Hodgman, the office manager at Northwoods, promoted Caribou's software systems to her contractors because of its flexibility and user-friendliness. Each of her contractors has somewhat different tracking and reporting needs. Also, because many of the contractors also work for other customers, it was important that they have a system flexible enough to handle a wide variety of data tracking needs, payment structures, etc. Caribou's system fits that bill.

According to Hodgman, "Logger's Edge has been such a reliable and stable system for us ever since we started the business five years ago. The reporting benefits are terrific, and Caribou has tailored our reports to provide us with the information we need. Dan Smith, the owner, and all the foresters can look at our net profit per cord on a weekly or monthly basis to help them decide where we should send certain types of wood, and they use the delivery reports to help monitor our quota proactively to ensure we get the best rates we can by consistently meeting our quota. The Job Profit reports let them see not only our harvesting costs, but also our road building and seeding costs, so they can make better decisions about what kind of investments they should or shouldn't be making in connection with that job."

Computers, smart phones, and the Internet have made a huge difference in the way most industries conduct their business, and logging is no exception. It takes a bit of planning and forethought to get the right software tools in place and to get the office and field personnel trained to use them properly, but the payoffs are well worth it: reduction in administrative overhead costs, fewer data entry errors, and more timely access to the information needed to run a profitable operation in today's competitive marketplace. **TH**