

So...you like the idea of horse logging your land?

Last winter was absent much of a winter. It was wet, mushy and muddy much of the time. For that reason, we (myself, a mill that had bought the timber and the owner of the timber) used a horse logger to log a fairly large tract of timber near Wellsboro, PA simply because it would have been much harder on the land to use mechanized logging equipment. It was a tough slog for the logger...a lot of logs in long skids in steep and otherwise difficult conditions, and the horse logger was new at it. We learned a lot in doing it.

As imperfect as it was at times, there were also times, especially on cold mornings in fresh snow, when the whole process worked well and it was quite beautiful to watch. In fact, it was almost surreal at times like that.

This young man doing the horse logging, Luke Patt, and his partner Kristen (she runs a pair of horse sometimes also) have come a long way in a short time in a profession and partnership.

In the early part of this winter, he actually logged in Woodland Park in the middle of Wellsboro...a place where the resident deer would stand and watch the huge 2000lb. animals like kids at a zoo. It was pretty funny to watch the deer watching the horses. They probably had never seen anything with four legs that big. That worked out well for Wellsboro and Luke, and we basically took only the ash (all in the process of dying), and the over mature sugar (hard) maple. So...it was a fine line to walk. The idea was to take the stuff that was probably going to be hazardous for folks walking in the park in the near future, but do

it in a way to make it economically possible for the logger, even with many rotten butt portions, especially the maple.

So now (during the winter of 2019-2020) Luke and Kristen are doing a bigger, more rural job near Beaver Dams, NY on three adjacent properties, and doing quite well at it. In fact, it is a great place to do it. The horses are in a stable in the middle property and are taken care of (very willingly) by the owner when Luke is not there. Luke did have some assistance from a small bulldozer to build a skid trail to a log decking area for two of the three properties by another logger who is mechanized and an excellent logger in all aspects. In fact, this logger could have probably done this sale cheaper for the owners.

What, you say; horse logging can more expensive than mechanized logging? Well...yes...especially in larger forests with large volumes of timber. So it turns out that it is not that simple.

Here are some things horse loggers have said about their work:

"horses are great in small forests with the right, high-value timber and terrain. The problem is that really good sites for horses are not common and I log them fast since they are so small."

"Logging horses have good days and bad days, but they like routine more than anything." In other words, "The best thing you can do for a horse is work him often and put him with an experienced horse." Also:

“You need land owners that will take less for their logs. That works where folks understand, but not enough for lots of loggers to make a living that way.”

Luke works with a steel logging arch usually which suspends the front end of the log via a cantilever frame on two wheels to ease the skid as well as providing a place for the logger to ride. Moving an average of 250 bd.ft. of hardwood per skid at about 3000 lbs. which goes downhill quick when you go up hill long or steep.

Skid distances of over 1500 ft. become a time consuming thing. Skid distance is from the fallen tree to the landing where logs are picked up by a logging truck or to a bunching place where mechanization takes over.

Skidding downhill is easier until it isn't. Working on steeper slopes requires greater skill and well trained horses. On some steep slopes where trees would normally be taken, if there is not a good run-out at the bottom, I do not mark the trees to be cut. Just too dangerous.

Working in snow on steep ground is dangerous as the logs can run over the horses. Luke actually just hooks up one horse in some of these situations and basically bunches the logs at the bottom to be skidded by a team from there.

I think most of the horse-logging operations I've seen in recent years are restorative/salvage, taking the dying species such as ash and adding the over mature of other species. That's what is happening in the Beaver Dams operation.

Aside from a horse logger's log cutting and moving skills, skill at grading the logs to give owners more value at the mill as well as giving the mill the right sizing, are also important.

Most of the loggers, both horse and otherwise, I have known through the years have been a cut above. I also love their humor. I guess you have to have a sense of humor when you work in a profession which is about as dangerous as anything out there.

In the end of things, if you ever have the opportunity to have a logger with or without horses logging for you, enjoy the process. It is special.