

Sustainable Forestry a Priority for Catskills Logger

By Alan Condra - May 5, 2017



Foothills Sustainable Forestry, located in the foothills of the Catskills, is aptly named for Sam Beisler's approach to logging. Future decades are always on his mind when planning each job.

In the late 90's most teens wanted the latest Nintendo game. Sam Beisler, from Oneonta, New York, wasn't quite like most teens. His parents bought him what he really wanted, a firewood processor. This was pretty much the start of his forestry career, using his new machine to split wood for the fireplace market. Sam's folks helped guide him during his early enterprise. Sam recalled, "My mother and father helped me a lot with it when I was in high school. Back then we didn't have Facebook, Twitter, and all those other nice cool ways of advertising." A good reputation, word of mouth and the local newspaper sufficed, and Sam kept busy with his firewood venture.

"When I was 16, we bought a used Franklin 405 skidder," Sam said. "We found some wood lots and cut it into firewood." His father helped him deliver the already cut firewood and Sam's firewood enterprise grew.

After high school, Sam worked primarily for his father David at his excavation business Seward Sand and Gravel. During the weekends and winter months Sam spent his working hours in the woods cutting timber. In 2010 his father bought land nearby and Sam worked to log it. Other logging jobs followed and Sam's career path began to focus solely on logging. "Once we logged it things started to pick up and get busier and busier. This made my decision easy to stay in the woods," Sam said.

Today Sam's logging business goes by the name of Foothills Sustainable Forestry. The small company consists of a Ponsse Scorpion King harvester, a Komatsu 840 forwarder, and a secondary Timberjack 1110D, where Sam is the main operator, and his brother Ben helps out as needed. As to working with his brother, "He's a good operator and I don't have to think about that end of the operation." As a young enterprise, Sam acknowledges that Foothills Sustainable Forestry is an evolving business.

The name Foothills Sustainable Forestry in part is a reference to the area of Oneonta being in the foothills of the Catskills. Moreover, the name is in sync with his approach to forest management. He says that future decades are always on his mind when planning for each job. During his career, Sam hopes to work some of the same lands multiple times. "I'm only 34 years old. It would be nice to go around and cut a few of these pieces two or three times." He feels that using a harvester as opposed to his former approach of a chain saw and skidder allows him to fine tune his harvests. "Our area has an abundance of low value timber because with a saw and skidder you really can't afford to do what the woods need," Sam said. "I want to have another generation of timber to harvest. I don't just want to go in and do it once. That will make my job harder because I'll have to travel further down the road."

While Sam does occasionally contract with mills and timber companies, he mostly works his own timber and buys within an hour radius of Oneonta. "I will subcontract a little bit, but pretty much everything I work on is my own timber and my own jobs. I buy standing timber from the state and I'll buy private."

While Sam will occasionally sub-contract his services with local saw mills, he prefers to work on his own jobs. Sam said, "As far as sub-contracting goes, I use them as fill-in work. I've discovered that sub-contracting for saw mills needs to be accomplished in a timely manner so that I can focus on my own purchased timber." Sam continued, "You either sub-contract or you buy your own equipment and do that. You really can't do 50/50." In the complete picture, focusing on his own harvests helps keep Foothills consistently busy. Sam noted, "Even in mud season when these hand crews are shut down we usually have jobs that are either private or just doing cleanup on them, I very rarely have to stop."

Sam primarily harvests red pine and spruce. He sells to Whiteman Lumber, Decker Forest Products, Quality Hardwoods as well as a few other forest products companies. Hardwood typically is sold to local mills with soft woods shipped to Canada for dimensional lumber. The finished dimensional lumber is back hauled to major retailers such as Lowe's and Home Depot. According to Sam, about 90% of their saw logs stay local.

On the hardware side, Sam took delivery of his current forwarder, a Komatsu 840 in December 2013. Sam observed, "At that point I was making the transition to semi cut-to-length with lesser equipment." He considered various forwarder options, but it largely came down to price. "I had an idea of what I was capable of doing, production and dollars and cents-wise at that point, but I wasn't 100% confident. So I wanted to get into some equipment that was less expensive." He had a good working relationship with his rep at CJ Logging Equipment in Boonville, New York. "The numbers looked good. I figured if I had to I could always run it for a while and then sell it."

On the harvester side, Sam had familiarity with the Ponsse brand from visiting Ponsse's headquarters in Rhinelander, Wisconsin on equipment scouting trips. "The first time I went out, I met Sam Heikola and I looked at used equipment. I was looking to replace my Timbco 415." Sam continued, "I'd been around them a little bit, but not a lot. I watched an Ergo work in Maine."

While he could appreciate what Ponsse had to offer, the distance to the nearest Ponsse service center was a concern. He had read articles in trade journals, including Timberline, that spoke well of Ponsse's service. "I've read the articles about how everybody is so enamored with how good the service is." When he was kicking tires at Ponsse in Rhinelander, in October of 2015, "I'm

thinking to myself; can the service really be that good, can it be far superior to other manufacturers? Am I going to regret having a dealer that's 900 miles away?"

The decision to make a Ponsse purchase came down to making a bit of a leap of faith in the company's service, a decision Sam has not regretted. "That's a big selling point, a big reason I went this direction." Now that he has spent some time with the Scorpion King and working with Ponsse support, he can attest to the high level of service that he had read about. "After owning it – absolutely. They are great and I am 900 miles away. I can't imagine what it would be like if I lived in Rhinelander."

Sam initially considered a Ponsse Ergo, but it was his experience in the excavation field that pointed him in the direction of the Scorpion King. Noting the considerable difference in how the crane is mounted between the two models, Sam said, "I had a couple reservations about it (the Ergo). Coming from the excavation side, the Ergo was nothing like an excavator. I really wanted the crane, the head, and the cab as all one unit." He had the opportunity to get a hands on feel of Ponsse's harvester options. "They took us to a job and I rode in a Scorpion. Pretty much within the first five minute ride I had in it I thought – yep, this is what I want. This is for me."

Once he was sold on the Scorpion line, Sam had to choose between the base model and the King. "I needed the H7 head. The timber we cut out here is big. On the job that Sam came and looked at my 911.5, I was cutting spruce that had 1,200 board feet on it."

The first Scorpion King to go to work in the state of New York was put into service for Foothills Sustainable Forestry during December of 2015. Sam picked up the machine directly off the boat in the port in Baltimore. Once back in Oneonta, a crew of three came to New York from Ponsse for the initial setup and training.

After nearly a year and a half with the Scorpion King, Sam said, "I'm satisfied with it. I think that it's everything that it was represented as, and it will do everything it should do. Obviously in bigger timber you would like to have a bigger one. You grab hold of a 27 inch oak tree and you pick it off the stump, it's like – yeah I'd like to have a little more lift on this crane, but you also have to look at what you're trying to get it to do."

Moving up in machine size combined with the Scorpion series three section auto leveling frame and cab gives Sam increased confidence in hilly terrain. He said, "I had a 911.5 Komatsu before this and I know we're going up a class from a 38,000 pound machine to almost a 50,000 pound machine, so I know there's a difference in the ballast. This thing is unbelievably stable because of that. It's just glued to the ground."

Sam recently added to his equipment capabilities with the purchase of a Liebherr 716 dozer, reportedly the first one sold in the country. Either Sam, his brother Ben, or an operator with his father's excavation business runs the machine. Sam also works with his father for equipment transportation from job to job, alleviating Sam from having to invest in a tractor trailer. "I have thought about buying a tractor trailer, but I think about it and see what he (his father) goes through to keep the trucks going, the maintenance, finding drivers and I think I'll just let him do it," Sam said.

Looking to the future for Foothills Sustainable Forestry, Sam said, "Looking down five to ten

years, I would like to find a couple operators who are very productive and are hard workers.” Sam would like to be able to free himself up to fine tune productivity and efficiency. As both the harvester operator and timber buyer, he observed, “Right now it’s a lot of work for one person. I am optimistic that I will find one to two people with a similar mindset so that Foothills can continue to grow and be successful.”