
Logger Training: What Happens Beyond the Classroom?

BY GREG BERNDTSON

There is no question timber harvesting is a dangerous occupation. The overview of the logging profession on the OSHA webpage summarizes the job and leaves no doubt about the risk factors.

By many measures, logging is the most dangerous occupation in the United States. The tools and equipment such as chain saws and logging machines pose hazards wherever they are used. As loggers use their tools and equipment, they deal with massive weights and irresistible momentum of falling, rolling, and sliding trees and logs. The hazards are more acute when dangerous environmental conditions are factored in, such as uneven, unstable or rough terrain; inclement weather including rain, snow, lightning, winds, and extreme cold and/or remote and isolated work sites where health care facilities are not immediately accessible.

The combination of these hazards present a significant risk to employees working in logging operations throughout the country, regardless of the type of timber being logged, where it is logged, or the end use of the wood

For many, this is the lure of the job. It takes an indescribable physical toughness to wield a chainsaw for hours a day, and a certain mental toughness to invest thousands, or even millions of dollars into modern logging equipment to produce an often volatile commodity. There is a rush to it all though, a sense of pride and satisfaction that cannot easily be put into words. Loggers are a different breed, always have been and always will be. It's the lore of the industry, clean back to the tall tales of Mr. Bunyan and his trusty blue ox Babe.

The modern logger also faces challenges beyond turning standing timber into usable logs, pulpwood, and chips. In a society increasingly more concerned with environmental health and quality, Best Management Practices, or BMPs as they are commonly referred to, are now the norm. Intent to cut forms, E&S Plans, road bonding permits, and noise ordinances all factor into starting a new harvest site. Aesthetics, or how a property looks, are how the public judges loggers both during and after a sale is completed. And sustainability matters; consumers now, more than ever, want to know that products they use are not coming with the cost of environmental degradation. One simply needs to look at the increase in sales at local farmers markets to see first-hand how consumer demands are shifting and that

environmental awareness is increasingly present in our society.

In addition to that, challenges arise with finding and keeping employees. The nature of the work is at times very physically demanding, or requires many hours of seat time in more modern equipment to be profitable. With the dangers of the job, workers' compensation rates are higher than most other industries. Paying skilled employees a competitive wage and bearing the additional costs of doing so legally can be financially burdensome. Keeping up with all the paperwork associated with having a spread of equipment, a fleet of trucks, and a workforce to keep it all moving profitably is no small feat.

With all of these factors in consideration, it is no surprise the issue of logger training is polarizing within the logging workforce. Some embrace it as a positive influence on the industry, others view it as a necessary evil, and some refuse to set foot in a classroom and pay for what they feel is an unnecessary waste of time and money. This contention dates back to Soren Eriksson bringing his Game of Logging methods to the United States back in the 80's, and is still very much alive today. The logger in 2018 finds himself in a tricky predicament, possibly harboring views that alienate him from friends and competitors, landowners, and wood buyers.

Logger training in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions dates back to the late 80's or early 90's in most cases, a time when mechanical harvesting had yet to really take hold. Wood production at the time still relied heavily on skilled hand cutters and skidder operators to get wood roadside. At the heart of that training was an emphasis on safety. The Game of Logging Method, using bore cuts to establish a hinge and working toward the back of the tree, ultimately ensuring a quicker and safer escape, was still a relatively new concept. But it made sense, considering most injuries from falling objects occur within 10 feet of the stump. In the last 30 years, thousands of woods workers, arborists, landowners, and casual cutters have taken at least the basic GOL 1 course to learn safe saw handling and felling skills.

As environmental impacts came to the forefront of public concern of logging operations, those too became part of the logger training requirements. To this day the core requirements of most training programs cover broader environmental topics like Best Management Practices, Logging Aesthetics, and Clean Stream Laws pertaining to erosion and sedimentation issues.

In the northeast states, core training requirements range from 20-32 credits. New Hampshire's Professional Logger Program requires 4 courses of 8 credits each. New York and



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Pennsylvania have similar programs that are slightly less time consuming, requiring 8 hours of safe saw handling, 8 hours of Environmental Concerns, and 4-5 hours of CPR and first aid.

Upon completion of the core training, continuing education is required to maintain 'trained logger' status. In the state of Vermont, a logger is required to take 16 hours of training ever two years to stay current. In Pennsylvania, it is 4 credits a year or 8 credits bi-annually, and you must maintain a valid CPR card. As the industry has moved in a more mechanical direction, continuing education classes cover a range of topics such as GPS use, maintenance and troubleshooting of hydraulic systems, or improving chip quality for biomass producers. Also available are GOL levels 2-4, courses on forestry, wildlife habitat, and safe trucking. Logger Rescue has also become a very well attended class for both loggers and first responders that may deal with logging accidents.

The question remains: Does training really work? Has the industry improved much in the 25+ years that these programs have been in place? Proponents seem to think so, as injury rates are down. Outreach is being done to improve the public's perception of logging, and touting the benefits of a trained workforce helps that cause. Since the inception of these programs, thousands of loggers across the Northeast and Lake States have completed some level of logger training. Advocates for the current system also claim they are not in the business of enforcement, that these trainings are just that, strictly educational.

Critics however have plenty to say on the contrary. They correlate logger safety more to a shift toward mechanization than simply training programs. It's hard to disagree that felling or bucking trees from inside a well-protected cab is safer than doing so with a chainsaw in hand. They also point to the lack of follow through with a training program, suggesting that it stops at the classroom. There is no check-up, no site visit, and no

way to know whether what is being taught is actually being implemented. It's a fair argument; training is only good if it's actually put into practice. And perhaps the biggest cause for concern, what about the bad apples in the industry? There is little requirement for training, or maintaining current status in many states. Buyers are pretty lax about requiring loggers go through training, especially in the sawmill sector. Pennsylvania for example has approximately 850 loggers meeting current training requirements, but over 4000 loggers in its workforce. Less than 25%

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participation really makes some question what, if any good, these programs do.

More than one logger has voiced frustration with the current system. Loopholes exist that seem to ensure there will always be an uneven playing field. Stories like a trucking outfit or large scale logger maintaining a current training card, but then procuring wood off of loggers that never attend training and are known for doing unsightly work. Or operators paying crewmembers as subcontractors instead of employees as they should be, cutting without proper harvest permits or soil disturbance plans, working without appropriate safety gear etc., yet still putting logs and pulpwood into the market. When that wood gets delivered to a mill claiming to use trained loggers and committed to proper harvesting practices, it should be no surprise loggers striving to abide by the rules get a little tuned up.

A large contractor summed it up pretty well: "I took 3 of my guys to training and treated them to lunch. Cost of the class, fuel to get there and whatnot I had over \$100 spent for the day, plus their wages. Those guys run newer machines on my crew and we certainly didn't produce wood that day, so that's also a financial hit. When my wood gets unloaded next to wood from a guy that could care less about training or implementing it in the field, and we get the same money for our product, you can bet I don't like it! Kind of makes me wonder if doing things by the book really matters."

If log or pulp buyers aren't upholding their claims to only source fiber from trained loggers, this is the unfortunate reality of today's logging business climate.

The Master Logger Certification Program offers a different, albeit more expensive approach for good loggers to gain recognition. Ted Wright, Executive Director of the Trust to Conserve Northeast Forests (TCNF) and program administrator for Northeast Master Logger Certification touts the benefits of the program. "First and foremost it's a voluntary program, but there are some teeth to it. We certainly don't discourage training, but we base performance on what is actually happening in the woods. We bring a team of auditors out and review current harvest sites and past jobs to see that the logger is actually conducting harvests in a professional way. This is true point of harvest verification. We don't take giving the Master Logger title lightly. Also, you can be removed from the program if you don't uphold the standards we expect of a Master Logger.

While gaining certification sounds like a fairly strict undertaking, the program is gaining steam. Over 18 states have a Master Logger Certification, and the American Loggers Council recently voted to invest in efforts to reinvigorate programs in states where support has dwindled.

As for the Northeast Master Logger program, its momentum is growing. Starting with an original cohort of 15 loggers in 2001, over 107 contractors across the states of Maine, NH, VT, MA, CT, RI, and NY hold the Master Logger title today.

Logger Andy Irish of Peru, Maine was one of the original 15 loggers to pursue certification back in 2001. A well respected advocate for the logging industry, Irish sees Master Logger Certification as the way forward, and feels point of harvest

verification is the way to go. Other Master Loggers agree; the Master Logger designation tells the public these loggers are in fact true professionals and are doing a good job.

So what goes in to gaining the Master Logger Certification? As Wright explained, the program really emphasizes professionalism. "We want to see that jobs are laid out and harvested in proper fashion," said Wright. "That water quality concerns are addressed, bridges are used where needed, BMPs followed etc. On completed jobs we expect to see proper closeout, that soil stabilization has been done where required, erosion concerns mitigated, that sort of thing. And we expect crews to be operating legally, with employees paid as they should be. We want to see spill kits on machines so they can be accessed quickly, not just buried somewhere in the truck back on the landing. We also check in with landowners and require professional references. We don't get into the pricing agreements, but we certainly don't tolerate theft either."

As with any program though, there are concerns, and it is certainly not for everyone. There are costs associated with conducting the initial and subsequent bi-annual follow up inspections. And there are administrative costs to promote the program. Some loggers see the organization as simply more red tape, another influence that favors big operators and squeezes the little guys. Although the mix of Master Loggers is diverse,

most are fully mechanized crews.

There is also the conundrum of the contract logger, and they make up a large chunk of the workforce in states from southern New England down through West Virginia. One New York logger told me he agreed with the program, even picked up the paperwork and debated pursuing the certification. "I have nothing against the certification, but it's hard for me to justify the expense with no financial return. I cut for a mill, and they set the rates. I wasn't going to make any more per thousand to cut and skid timber they're buying, so why spend that money and go through the hassle?" When I asked if he thought the mill would use it as a selling point were he certified, he responded, "Oh, I'm sure!"

The biggest takeaway in all of this may be the fact that loggers are pushing for this. Whereas past programs were implemented by wood buyers or other groups imposing their way on the logging sector, this is loggers themselves looking for a way to stand out, put their best foot forward, and be recognized for a job well done. Will the mills or end users of forest products take a deeper look into some of the grievances referenced? Only time will tell. One thing is for certain: The skilled operators already holding the Master Logger Certification are working to boost the image of the industry and if the rest of workforce is brought up with them, that is certainly not a bad thing. NL



The advertisement features a large white Dorsey trailer in the foreground, with a semi-truck pulling another Dorsey trailer in the background. The Dorsey logo, "ESTABLISHED 1911", is prominently displayed in the top left. The background is a mix of red and white geometric shapes. In the bottom right, there are two smaller images of different trailer models. The text on the right side of the ad describes Dorsey's long history and commitment to durability. At the bottom, there is a call to action to visit DorseyTrailer.net.

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