

Hot And Cold

■ Jason Watts notes the ups and downs of the pulpwood market.

By David Abbott

BROOKHAVEN, Miss. **W**atts Logging Inc. owner Jason Watts, 37, knows what too much of a good thing can sometimes be. As an operator focusing primarily on first thinnings, it's good for him that pulpwood demand remains steady. Unfortunately, as with so many cruel ironies of the logging business, a good market for pulpwood can also spell trouble for pulpwood producers. The market gets glutted quickly as mills find too many eager suppliers. In February, Watts said his primary mill outlet was only 20 minutes from the job site, but trucks were facing better than three-hour turnarounds. "It's backed up like a soup line," he says. "I knew it was gonna happen. The building side is no good so everybody is cutting pulpwood."



One area where he doesn't see too much of a good thing: productive uptime in the woods. "When you're able to work, you need to be working, not in a shop with something broken down." That's his philosophy, and that's why he believes in keeping newer equipment rather than maintaining older machines. He turns over equipment roughly every three years, after it is paid off but before it reaches 6,000 hours (he notes that the warranty is up at 5,000 hours). "For me, that is better than repair costs." He notes several other reasons for keeping new equipment, including tax incentives that allow the owner to claim depreciation.

His commitment to keeping new machines and not losing work time to machine repairs is one reason, he says, for his long-standing loyalty to Cat and Prentice machines and to his dealers, Puckett Machinery and D-M Equipment. "If you have a machine

down for three or four days and it's under warranty, Puckett will bring you a new machine to use while yours is in the shop that is as good or better than the one you brought them. That is one of the main reasons I stick with Cat. Also, both places have good service departments."

Operations

Watts runs his crew with a Prentice 2384 loader with a CTR 426 pullthrough delimeter, a Cat 525C skidder and a Prentice 2470 feller-buncher with a thinning head. He also uses a Cat D5G dozer and, when appropriate, a Chambers Deliminator, when he's working in juvenile wood that is heavy on limbs. He hauls exclusively through contractors, and estimates total equipment investment value at \$850,000. His main equipment dealer is Puckett Machinery for Cat and now Prentice as well.

D-M Equipment in McComb is his Prentice dealer, but was recently added to the Puckett family as the D-M Equipment Division of Puckett. He turns to B&G Equipment, in Magnolia, for parts for the Chambers Deliminator, which was purchased directly from Chambers.

His wheeled equipment rolls on Firestone tires. The cutter is fitted with 28s most of the year and 34s during the winter, while the skidder has 30.5s that are dualed in the wet winter months with 23.5s on the outside. Watts prefers Shell Tellus 68 hydraulic fluids and Rotella oil. Each operator keeps up with the maintenance schedule on his machine, changing fluids and filters every 250 hours and greasing weekly, with center-sections getting lubed every three days and the cutter head daily.

Matt Otis, who has been with Watts longer than any of his men, drives the skidder. Kenneth Bowman



Watts has long bought Prentice from D-M Equipment and Cat from Puckett Machinery, companies that recently merged. Inset, right: Jason Watts.

mans the feller-buncher, and Robert Williams operates the loader. Jerry Longino handles additional trimming on the ground, and Tommy Smith, who is Watts' uncle, runs the dozer.

Watts works mainly in first thinnings for Georgia-Pacific, a contract he has maintained for the last dozen years. He usually does fourth-row thinning, but that depends on the landowner. Currently, he hauls pine pulpwood to G-P's paper mill in Monticello and hardwood pulpwood to the Cortez Byrd chip mill in Brookhaven. The only specification is that all pulpwood has a 2 in. top. Almost all of his production is pulpwood, though he does see some chip-n-saw in the occasional second thinning. That production goes to the G-P chip mill in Goss, near Columbia. The crew churns out 50-60 loads a week.

Background

In business for himself for 17 years now, Watts did not grow up in logging. His father sold life insurance and his mother was a teacher. One of his uncles—actually his mother's cousin who was referred to as an uncle—was in logging, and that was how Watts was introduced to the industry. He did some work in the woods for that uncle during summers when he was still in school, but he didn't really fall in love with it until after he tried college. After spending a year studying diesel mechanics at Co-Lin—Copolia-Lincoln Community College—he knew that wasn't for him. Instead, he went to work in the log woods for a friend, Steve Watts, for three years. He says Steve is probably a distant relative but he can't say for sure if they are related or not. "We don't go to family reunions or anything but there are not too many Watts around."

After three years working for someone else, Watts knew he was ready to go on his own. Puckett financed him in house for a 518 Caterpillar grapple skidder and a 2170 Prentice loader with a debarker. He cut with a Bell three-wheeled feller-buncher financed through a bank. And things went from there.

Today Watts is a member of the Mississippi Cattleman's Assn., the Mississippi Loggers Assn. and the Lincoln County Forestry Assn. He and his wife Heather, married for 17 years, have four children: Courtney, 16; Sawyer, 14; Tucker, 11; and Tanner, 9. All four are involved in sports, especially baseball, and this time of year that is how the family spends its time. Whatever little free time Watts has is devoted to being a baseball coach, but unfortunately with the age differences among his children he obviously can't coach all of their teams every year, so he takes turns with each one. **SLT**



Watts would rather keep new machines than lose work time repairing older ones.



Left to right: Jerry Longino, Matt Otis, Robert Williams, Kenneth Bowman



Watts trades in machines after three years or before 6,000 hours, once it is paid off.