

FROM LOGGING TO FULL-SERVICE FORESTRY

LANDOWNERS PLAY A MAJOR IN NICOLS BROS. STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

BY ERIC JOHNSON, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Billy and Jim Nicols are co-owners and founders of Nicols Bros. Logging and Forestry based in Rumford, Maine. In business together since 1979, the brothers have succeeded by constantly adapting, according to Jim, to meet the main challenge in recent years posed by declining markets for pulpwood and other lowgrade timber. They've seen some of their major markets shut down as the demand for certain grades of paper, like newsprint, disappeared seemingly overnight.

They have adapted their equipment spread and marketing efforts to compensate for the changing conditions, including dipping their toes into the whole tree chip market for

awhile—something they ultimately decided to let others pursue. Over the years their strategy was to “put everything back into the business,” which today gives them the resources to expand their services and diversify. What they've built is a full-service forestry and land management company, where forest landowners are offered a wide range of services, including timber harvesting.

Perhaps best known by *Northern Logger* readers for their work on Pingree lands back in the mid '90s, thinning spruce/fir stands by removing the small and stunted material, which was sold to Madison Paper Industries in nearby Madison as roundwood pulp. They did it with one of the earliest cut-to-length systems deployed in the Northeast, a Rottne forwarder and harvester. The Madison mill is gone—shuttered for good one year ago in May of 2016, but that stand of thinned spruce/fir is doing great, Jim notes with pride, holding his hands out to show how big they've grown in the intervening years.

Before they acquired the Rottne CTL system, the brothers ran a more conventional logging operation. By 1984, the equipment spread grew from one to four cable skidders. In 1986, the company diversified its machinery lineup to include feller-buncher systems and logging trucks. In 1994, the brothers bought the Rottne machines and increased their number of employees to 20.

One notable aspect about the



Jim Nicols

Nicols Bros. operation has been their exquisite maintenance practices. The operators swapped their work boots for slippers when they got into their respective machines' cabs back in the day. You could literally eat off the floors of those operators cabs back in the mid '90s, and Jim says you still could today, though the equipment has gotten bigger to reflect the modern industry-wide emphasis on production.

Today, Jim says, they're using rubber-tired Rottne harvesters and processors with tracks over the tires to boost production. From 1994 to the present, the company has transitioned to a fully mechanized logging company. In 2004 a new office and maintenance facility was acquired in the Rumford Industrial Park and a log yard was set up. When visited by *The Northern Logger* in late April, the yard was filled with hardwood—from veneer yellow birch to piles of low-grade to be contract chipped. A firewood processing operation, R&N Firewood, is a division of Nicols Brothers Logging. It first began operation in 2009 with cousins Ryan and Nate Nicols operating a Timberwolf processor. It continues to crank out processed firewood, which is sold cut, split and delivered locally for \$175 per cord. In Maine, by law, a "cord" is a full cord and unless it's been kiln dried or completely air dried, all firewood is labeled as "green."

Also at the yard, veneer butts and other wood pieces with no commercial value can be purchased by anyone with a strong back and a pickup truck, with the yard's scale calculating the amount owed. It's a very small part of a very large, diverse operation, but it's a good way to keep the yard clean and hopefully generate some goodwill in the community.

And while they're obviously in business to generate profits and salaries, the management team, which includes Jim's wife and office manager, Carlene, sees itself as a potential force for good in the community and beyond. The company mission statement posted on its website explains:

Our mission is to provide the highest quality commercial tree harvesting, utilization and transportation services. We also strive to promote professional excellence, workplace safety, and the general well-being



In late April, key pieces of equipment went into the shop for routine spring maintenance.

of our employees. Through this, Nicols Brothers aims to support sustainable forest ecosystem management and the local economy.

The company currently employs 30 people and owns or subcontracts the following logging and trucking equipment: cut to length systems, full mechanical feller buncher systems, log trucks, loaders and slashers, excavators, bulldozers, graders and other road-building equipment.

Timber harvesting operations are conducted on both private and public lands in southwestern Maine, including a recent foray into the national forest process, which Jim says was "interesting." He said some of the paperwork made sense, but overall it was probably more trouble than it was worth. On the other hand, he is undecided about whether to attempt to buy and cut national forest timber in the future. He notes that uncertainty about the future of wood markets and supplies in the region is reason enough to keep as many options open as possible.



The yard in Rumford is where hardwood products—from veneer to firewood—are sorted.

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Perhaps the best example of that is reflected in Nicols Brothers' promotion of itself as a full-service forestry and timber management firm, offering such services as boundary marking, pre-commercial thinning, roadbuilding, timber cruising and a good mix of other forestry and logging services to satisfy landowners' needs. They'll do as little or as much as

you're willing to pay or contract for. The brothers don't have an official succession plan for the business, but Jim's right-hand man, Allen Chartier, seems poised to take over its management at some point. Jim Nicols doesn't seem anywhere near retirement, but it's always good to have someone waiting in the wings if needed.



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