

# MASTER LOGGER CELEBRATES 15 YEARS

## *THE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM HAS GROWN AND LOOKS FORWARD TO EXPANDING*

BY JEFFREY DUBIS

In 2000, the Professional Logging Contractors of Maine (PLC) recognized that many logging contractors did exemplary work without public acknowledgement. The PLC began to ask the question, "What

if a program was developed whereby conscientious logging firms could be recognized through some form of certification? What if those who conform to specific high standards could leverage this certification to gain more business for their company?" From this thinking, the idea of the Maine Master Logger Pro-

gram was born. In 2001, the first group of 30 Maine Loggers received Master Logger Certification. Now in the year of its 15th anniversary, the program has grown significantly, gained new leadership, and has a new home

The success of the program has attracted national and international attention. In 2002, this pioneering effort in designing and implementing the Maine Master Logger program was unanimously adopted as the national model for logger certification by the 27 state associations in the American Loggers Council.

In 2003, program administration transferred to an independent non-profit organization, The Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestland (TCNF). Four years later, the Maine program merged with a similar program in southern New England to form the Northeast Master Logger Certification Program (NEMLC). Today, it includes all of New England and New York. In addition to the Master Logger Program, TCNF also houses Forest Management Group Certification programs for small landowners and Chain of Custody group certification for small manufacturers. Both programs allow small landowners and manufacturers to have their practices third-party certified under the stringent Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) without having to pay the same high costs as larger landowners or businesses. Logging contractors who become master loggers also have the option to receive Chain of Custody certification.

In late 2015, Ted Wright, a former high school logging and forestry instructor, took over as the executive director of TCNF. He is a firm believer in the principles of the Master Logger program. When asked why he took the position he said, "I've always enjoyed working with current and future loggers and with the industry. I believe strongly in what the Master Logger Program does and I feel it was a good move for me career-wise." One of the first changes Wright made was to move the TCNF office from New Gloucester, ME to Augusta, the state capital. Though not a geographically large move, this stationed the organization close to the state's political center where Wright felt loggers' needs might be better heard.



Maine Master Logger Ben Vosine.





**On this Vosine job, trees are felled with a feller-buncher.**



**They are delimbed with a Cat processor.**

The NEMLC program is certified through the Rainforest Alliance, one of several organizations that audit landowners and manufacturers for FSC certification. The Rainforest Alliance understood that logging operations have a significant impact on the health of forests. Any landowner can run into issues with long-term health and sustainability if harvesting practices are not up to a certain standard. As a result, the Rainforest Alliance developed the SmartLogging Program, the first ever third-party performance based certification for logging contractors. It gives loggers the opportunity to show commitment to long-term sustainability and forest health. In 2005, NEMLC became the first organization in the world to obtain certification through SmartLogging.

Loggers who receive NEMLC certification must meet nine stringent goals (Table). First, candidates submit to landowner reference checks. Next, safety and environmental violations background check surveys five years of a contractor's work history. The third step is a lengthy interview with an auditor in which the nine performance standards are discussed to

ensure a commitment to upholding them going forward. An audit of completed and active logging operations is conducted in which standards must be met or exceeded. The final step is a review of all audit reports by a seven-member certification panel. If the panel's recommendation is unanimous, only then does the applicant receive Master Logger certification. Recertification is required two years after initial certification, and then repeats every four years. Periodic audits are done to monitor continued compliance and improvements.

According to Ted Wright, certification benefits landowners and contractors. Landowners who have their land certified under the umbrella of TCNF Forest Management Group Certification are required in most instances to have a Master Logger harvest their woodlot. Certification is a good marketing tool that gives certified loggers an edge when competing for jobs because TCNF promotes certified loggers to landowners before others. Unfortunately, to date, master loggers have not been paid more for their wood than non-certified loggers.

### **Nine goals that a logger must meet for Master Logger certification.**

1. Document Harvest Operations Planning
2. Protect Water Quality
3. Maintain Soil Productivity
4. Sustain Forest Ecosystems
5. Manage Forest Aesthetics
6. Ensure Workplace Safety
7. Demonstrate Continuous Improvement
8. Ensure Business Viability
9. Uphold Certificate Integrity



**And moved to the landing with a Timber Pro forwarder.**

Similarly, a landowner does not typically get paid more for FSC certified wood although FSC certified wood opens up more markets for landowners. Interestingly, the act of certification of both the process and the product in the woods business may not raise the actual dollar value of a product at this time, but has great value in boosting marketability.

A landowner who hires a Master Logger has the assurance of employing a worker who upholds the highest standards. A harvest plan must be prepared based upon the landowner's objective. The logger and landowner go through a detailed pre-harvest and post-harvest inspection point-by-point, using the Harvest Integrity System. According to Wright, "Everything is above board. The landowner knows exactly what to expect."

*The Northern Logger* interviewed two contractors who are currently Master Logger Certified, Voisine Brothers of New Canada, Maine and W.C. Tripp Forest Products of Frankfort, Maine. Both firms reinforced much of what Wright said about the program in terms of the expectations and advantages.

W.C. Tripp Forest Products gained certification this past spring. Based near the Maine coast, the firm employs up to 20 people to operate two mechanical harvesting crews and a fleet of seven to eight log trucks. According to owner Wayne Tripp, the reason for becoming certified was simply to become one of the best. He said, "We were already doing 99 percent of what was asked for, so why not get the Master Logger brand?" As a result of the company's existing practices, the certification process was easy. The field inspections went smoothly.

"We had nothing to hide," Wayne Tripp says. "The only change for us will be an increase in some of the documentation we need to do." He sees future advantages as a way to increase efficiency. When asked what impact certification will have on his business, he pointed out that although he does not expect to see an increase in the amount that he is paid for his product, he does see it as an opportunity to obtain more work in the future.

Most jobs are for small landowners that, according to Tripp, "Require high quality work and Master Logger certification is proof that is what we do." Long-term,

he hopes more mills will begin to rely on wood cut by Master Loggers, and maybe allow for increased quota. Tripp notes that certification also assists in communicating the company's expectations to new employees.

Brothers Ben and Joe and their father Gary run Voisine Brothers Logging and have had Master Logger Certification since 2010. Currently the company has approximately 18 employees and is operating a whole tree system and a cut to length system.

Whereas W.T. Tripp focuses on small woodlots, the Voisines harvest exclusively on large industrial landholdings that dominate northern Maine. For them, obtaining certification and keeping it hasn't been a big deal. Although the initial certification process was time consuming, they had to change little in their daily operations.

The Voisines were already well recognized in the industry for their high-quality work. They were awarded the first ever Logging Contractor of the Year Award by the Professional Loggers Association of Maine in 2015. Irving Woodlands, the landowner they primarily harvest timber for, has Forest Stewardship Council certification. Therefore they already needed to supply Irving with weekly documentation similar to what is required for Master Logger certification. Like W.T. Tripp, they have not seen any increase in the rate they are paid as a result of certification nor do they really expect to.

They do not feel that certification has brought them any additional work because northern Maine is dominated by large industrial landowners, not small private landowners as in the southern part of the state. So why become certified? According to Joe and Ben, the Maine Forest Service offers two percent loans to logging contractors who have Master logger certification. For them, this has been a huge benefit.

Long-term, both brothers hope to see greater advantages for Master Loggers in northern Maine. "Being Master Loggers sets our business apart. This could have a positive impact going forward. Unfortunately most of the public does not really understand, or even know about the Master Logger program. This is something that needs to change."

This is not a problem unique to the Master Logger program. FSC and SFI certification for landowners and mill owners are not really understood by the public either. The Voisines feel it would be good if only Master Loggers were allowed to bid on timber sales on state land. Potentially this important incentive would give an advantage to loggers who go the extra mile. When the PLC receives a request for a contractor anywhere in the state of Maine, the Master Loggers on the list are always recommended first.

When *The Northern Logger* toured Voisine's operations in mid-June, a Cat processor was limbing and bucking wood laid down earlier by a feller-buncher. A Timber-Pro forwarder was picking up the wood and bringing it roadside.

The crew was just coming back to work after shutting down for several days due to rain. The trails were neatly laid out in straight lines and were free of mud and ruts in spite of all the rain. The roadside wood was all neatly sorted by product and everything was running smoothly. It was evident that the contractor takes pride in work and follows standards of the Master Logger program regularly.

The combination of feller bunchers and processor working together is becoming more common in northern Maine. It increases production over just using a processor and also reduces damage to regeneration that a processor typically does. And, with the elimination of the grapple skidder, there is significantly less ground disturbance.

The Northeast Master Logger certification program has grown significantly since its inception over 15 years ago. Its forward-thinking approach has led it to be used as a model throughout the U.S. and Canada. In 2011, a group from Japan met with NEMLC representatives. Since then, they have set up a similar program back home. Master logger programs of this caliber will likely continue to grow as interested parties in the forest industry discover its value in the sustainable long-term management of our forests. The next step is to spread public awareness and understanding of the benefits of Master Logger certification programs.