

Commitment Keeper

■ Paul Gunter's faith, name and timber buying skills sustain him during tough times.

LEESVILLE, SC

Paul Gunter, 62, is a man of convictions. If he says it, you know he believes it; if he makes a commitment, you know he will keep it. When he was diagnosed with leukemia 11 years ago he made a commitment to God that he would give the rest of his life to Him. He honors that commitment every week by attending church and prayer meetings and making home visits.

He made another kind of commitment 45 years ago when he started logging. "I'd cut and, when my help didn't show up, my wife would operate the skidder. We didn't have



a grapple so I would have to hook the cables for her and she would pull the logs out," he recalls. "It was really hard work. It would have been very easy to quit."

But he didn't. Over four decades, he expanded his business, North Edisto Logging, Inc. Now he runs four crews and has about \$5 million in equipment. His business has done really well until six months ago when the price of fuel started to take a significant bite out of his bottom line. He remains steadfast. "If you make a commitment you got to keep it," he says. "Disappointment is inevitable but discouragement is a choice. I think we all have to remember that in these tough times.

You have to be committed right now and you have to realize that there will be disappointments and discouragements."

Work

Gunter's crews work usually within a 120-mile radius of Leesville. They thin and clear-cut primarily pine. Each crew consists of feller-buncher, skidder and delimber/loader operators. Two more skidder operators are floaters to help where needed.

Crew 1 cuts for Plum Creek Timber Co., Inc., the largest private landowner in the nation with approximately eight million acres.

Gunter has been contracting for Plum Creek for three years and says the company has been really good to him. "They cut good wood, have a good market and they give us a fuel adjustment, which helps so much!" he says.

He had just two crews assigned to Plum Creek until about 18 months ago when the company announced its intention to add a crew. Gunter didn't want to miss out on the timber and decided to add a third crew. Nine months after he added the crew, Plum Creek downsized and Gunter had to find work for two of his Plum Creek crews. With Gunter's reputation in the area, it didn't take long to get the contracts.



Gunter describes his Prentice 2470/SH-50 as "the best thinning machine I've ever had."

"My daddy said, 'It's a poor frog that won't praise his own pond.' We had always done good work and the work we needed found us."

Crew 2 now contracts for Log Creek Timber, a timber harvesting business in Edgefield, SC. Crew 3 went to work for Claybourn Walters Company, Inc., which provides forestry and brokerage services for landowners in North and South Carolina.

Crew 4 cuts and sells wood that Gunter or his son, Rocky, 31, have purchased. Gunter runs the cutter; Rocky can operate all the equipment but usually mans the loader; and a floater operates the skidder. At times Gunter has to leave the cutting to his 20-year-old grandson, Cody, to tend to other business matters. A lot of business, including managing the movement of his trucks, is done by cell phone in the woods.

Equipment

Gunter has six wheel-type feller-bunchers, including a Prentice 2470 equipped with a Prentice SH-50 high capacity saw, a Prentice 2670 with a Hydro-Ax 22SC bunching saw and four Hydro-Ax 670s, all

with Hydro-Ax 22SC saws; nine skidders, including a Cat 545B, Cat 545C and Cat 525B; and six loaders equipped with delimiters, including a Prentice 384. He also has three dozers, 11 trucks—one Western Star, three Freightliners and the rest Internationals—and three lowboys. Three Dodge Ram 3500s and a Ford F-350, F-550 and F-650 make up his service truck fleet, along with an International rolling shop equipped with welding torches, air compressors and replacement fluids. All of his equipment rides on Firestone tires.

The Prentice 2470 with the SH-50 saw goes to whichever crew is thinning. He describes it as the "best thinning machine I've ever had." He says the feller-buncher has a sharper turning radius and moves quicker than others he has owned, and the saw design solves a common problem he finds with other heads. "Sometimes you have a time laying the trees down because they catch on the other trees and skin them up," he explains. "The SH-50 head holds the trees straight up, and when you lay them down it lays them straight down in that row. They don't fall out between the other standing trees."

He also likes the fact that the head is designed so he can move down a cut row, thinning on both sides without bumping into trees. "You can get to your trees so much better with that head."

Gunter has three machines on his wish list—another Prentice 2470/SH-50, a Cat 525C skidder with dual power and a Prentice 2384 with power and run modes. Both the skidder and the loader give the operator the ability to control the power for productivity or maximum fuel economy. He is currently trying out the skidder and says he would love to have it. "It gives you power when you need it, and when you don't need it, you get better fuel economy."

Until things turn around, however, he doesn't plan to buy any new equipment. "Right now I don't have any plans to trade, but I also believe that if you're sitting still you are going backwards."

Dealer Factor

When Gunter chooses new equipment, it's not all about the machine. The dealer factors heavily into his decision. "It's hard enough to do business. You know you are going

to have some problems and I don't want to go into a place where we are not working together and on the same page."

For 24 years, Gunter has been dealing with David (Bubba) Byrum at what was the Lexington branch of Pioneer Machinery. In December when Caterpillar sold its remaining interest in the Pioneer stores to Cat dealers in the Southeast, it became Pioneer South Carolina, a division of Blanchard Machinery.

Gunter says he has noticed a difference since Blanchard took over. "If we don't work as a team, from the logger to the equipment people to the forester to the mills, we won't survive," Gunter says. "I'd have to say that Blanchard joined the forestry team real well. The changes have been for the better. It seems like they are more customer-conscious and want to take care of the customer more. The service—everything—has been friendlier."

Fuel

Gunter's productivity target is 220 loads per week, but lately he says he's missed the mark by 40 loads a week. Quotas are one rea-



Crew 1, from left: Monty Smith, Bubba Williams Jr., Shane Hall, Lonnie Nicholson



Crew 3, from left: Ronnie McCurry, Daniel Hartley, Dean Steele, Dwight Chavis



Crew 2 consists of Abraham Gonzales, skidder operator; Ronnie Williams, foreman-loader operator; and David Taylor, cutter operator.



Crew 4, from left, consists of Paul Gunter, Rocky Gunter, Cody Gunter and Chris Hall. Blanchard sales rep Bubba Byrum is at far right.



Gunter's production goal is 220 loads per week.

son; another is decreased demand for big timber. Three of Gunter's crews are harvesting more small pulpwood that requires more work. The Plum Creek crew clear-cuts 80% of the time and is able to keep its production up.

Although Gunter gets some extra help from Plum Creek to compensate for thinning and fuel costs, he's not making money right now—just staying current with equipment payments and other expenses. "Fuel is the biggest thing that is killing us. I think we could live with the housing slump. Pulpwood is pretty stable, been carrying us pretty good, but fuel is \$3.79 a gallon (early March)."

As a result, he wishes he could contract out all his hauling instead of running his own trucks. "I had one contract hauler quit today. Can't afford the fuel," he laments. Contracting all the hauling would also allow Gunter to concentrate on logging. "Trucks scatter you. I might have a truck break down 100 miles away from home and then I have to tend to that. Logging, on the other hand, is concentrated all in one area."

Working Smart

Hard times can make smarter businessmen. Gunter says he's trying to manage his pennies better and cull out the weak spots in his business. "We can fuss about fuel but we can't do anything about it," he says. "But we can try to be more conscientious about maintenance and keep our breakdowns down. That way we can offset some of the fuel cost."

So he's keeping his air filters clean and the teeth on his sawheads sharp. "If you have good sharp teeth on your cutter, you will pay for those teeth in the fuel

you'll save. And it won't take long either." Air filters are inspected at least every other day, unless it is rainy. Sometimes rather than replacing a dusty filter, they can just blow it out a few times with the air compressor. His operators change the oil every 150-200 hours. They grease sawheads every day and the whole machine according to how hard they've been running it, but usually about once a week.

To save fuel, Gunter has been more diligent about trying to keep his trucks loaded. "If we've got the four crews spread out, we try to coordinate the trucking so they are not running empty quite as much."

Also, dozers have been sidelined to conserve on the fuel needed to transport them from job to job. Instead he uses skidders to push roads and clear landings.

Maintenance

Gunter says he's started kicking around the idea of signing up for Caterpillar's Customer Service Agreement (CSA). With a CSA, Blanchard handles all scheduled maintenance, other than daily servicing. "It allows the logger to focus on his core business," explains Lewis Armour, operations manager at Blanchard's Lexington store. "It simplifies things for him. He'll get longer life out of the machine, lower ownership costs and increase uptime." Maintenance can be scheduled for nights and weekends. CSAs are available on new or existing equipment—even competitive brands. "I think it would be a great idea," Gunter acknowledges. "I can be producing wood instead of working on machines. In these times, you just have to do

more of whatever you do best. I need to produce more wood."

Labor

North Edisto Logging employees get a week's paid vacation after they've been with the company a year. Right now health insurance is not provided because its cost is prohibitive, according to the logger.

Turnover is low. For example, James (Bubba) Williams, Crew 1 foreman, has been with the company 13 years. His work ethic seems to mirror Gunter's. "He works night and day, six days a week," Gunter says. "I won't let him work on Sundays; otherwise he'd be out there."

Gunter attributes low turnover to the fact that he always treats his employees as he wants to be treated and never asks anyone to do something he won't do himself. "I had one of my crew tell me this morning—you asked me so I will tell you—"Mr. Gunter, it ain't hard to follow a man who gets his hands dirty." Gunter has also been known to help his employees with financing for housing and transportation.

Health

So far Gunter has undergone four rounds of chemotherapy to treat his leukemia, but he's never missed a day of work. His doctors told him to keep doing what he was doing. Every three years or so his white blood cell count eases back up and he needs chemotherapy. He says that in the next month or two, he will probably have to go back on chemo again.

Other than getting tired quicker, he says his illness does not affect his work. His day starts at 4:30 and he stays in the woods until 5 p.m. He and his crews log five days a

week. On Saturday they service the equipment, while Gunter or his son Rocky might look at a tract of timber to buy. Sundays they rest. "If I can't make it in six days, I don't need to make it," he says.

Success Secrets

If you ask Blanchard's Byrum about the key to Gunter's success he'll tell you it's his skill at buying timber. He says that Gunter's business savvy and the relationships he has built with area landowners have sustained him through rough times.

Gunter will tell you his success is due to his faith and being honest and fair. "My daddy taught me that a good name is better than a full page ad in *The State* paper. A good name will carry you a long way."

Looking ahead five years, Gunter predicts he will be diversifying, probably into something related to alternative fuels. He predicts the next two or three years are going to be really tough, but believes that those who can endure will be in on the ground floor of new opportunities and will do well.

Unlike many loggers these days who encourage their sons and daughters to look outside of logging for their life's work, Gunter says he hopes his son and grandson will stay in the business. "I tell them I want them to be their own man and do what they want to do. But I also tell them there are problems and disappointments in any business. The business will turn around. I tell my boys, you don't grow on the mountaintops, you grow in the valleys."

Family

Three generations of the Gunter family are in the business. Besides his son and grandson, daughter Paula Bedenbaugh manages the office. Another daughter, Dedra Rush, helps in the office when she can. And wife Brenda, according to Bedenbaugh, is the "glue that keeps the family positive and happy." She also gets up and makes coffee every morning at 4:30. Gunter laughs when he relays the story of the morning his wife jumped out of bed at 3:40 a.m. and ran to the office next door to their home to make the coffee. She thought it was 4:40 and she was late.

A couple years ago tragedy struck the close-knit Gunter family when they lost Angela, the youngest daughter and Cody's mother. It was the hardest thing Gunter has ever been through in his life. "If you put everything on a scale on one side and then put my daughter's death on the other side, it would bottom out."

His faith got him through it. "If He could get us through that, He can get us through this timber business!"

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