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Pennsylvania Firewood Business Booming

Gish Logging Relies on Multitek Firewood Processors for High Volume Production



Gish Logging operates four Multitek 2040 firewood processing machines.

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FORT LOUDON, Pennsylvania — Ernie Gish and Mike Jones are serious about the firewood business. The two men own Gish Logging Inc., a company that processes, kiln-dries, packages, and sells firewood under the brand name Hotsticks®.

Gish Logging strives to make a firewood product that meets all the demands and desires of consumers, Ernie explained. To that end, the smallest details garner attention. For example, the firewood is packaged in plastic bags with built-in handles so the handles do not rip off. For a premium, customers can add fire starter to their package of firewood.

The firewood operations at Gish Logging are huge. The company runs full speed all year long and requires some heavy-duty equipment to keep up with that kind of production pace. Including its logging operations, Gish Logging employs 35 people.

Gish Logging uses four Multitek 2040

firewood processing machines to produce firewood. It was a Multitek machine that initially propelled Gish Logging into high gear. Ernie and Mike were so pleased with their first Multitek that they returned to the supplier, which is headquartered in Prentice, Wis., for additional equipment. The firewood company has bought six of the Multitek machines over the years.

Ernie and Mike initially churned out firewood on a part-time basis, working nights and weekends. They produced and sold a few hundred cords of firewood yearly. Customer requests for firewood, fueled by word-of-mouth referrals, grew quickly, and the men had to make a decision about what direction the business would take.

“We either had to get into it” as a full-fledged business or keep it as a small, part-time endeavor, said Ernie. “When we did decide, we had to go full-blown” to make sure the business succeeded. They decided to grow the business. They went full-time in 1984, incorporated the business, and invested in their first Multitek.

Ernie was part-owner of a machine shop before launching Gish Logging with Mike. Mike had considerable experience with machinery too, having grown up on a farm where he routinely felled trees that were milled to build fences and barns.

It was “the technology of the Multitek,” said Mike, that got his attention when they began looking at machinery options.

Because equipment maintenance falls largely under Mike’s purview, he has a keen interest in the reliability of the company’s equipment. And the Multitek firewood processors have impressed him. “They’ve been real good machines,” said Mike. “They really have some weld force.”

The Multitek firewood processors get a workout at Gish Logging. “We run our machines year ‘round, 40 to 50 hours per week,” said Mike.

“For the abuse they take,” said Ernie, the Multitek machines are great performers. “We have run some tremendous hours before rebuilds - 10,000 or 12,000 hours.”

About 70-80% of the company’s fire-

wood is oak. Packages of firewood normally may have mixed species with one exception. "We separate hickory for some restaurants," said Ernie.

He briefly described the company's firewood processing operations. "We have four Multiteks set up on a seven and one-half acre lot here," said Ernie. "All the Multiteks feed into one conveyor system." The 85-foot long conveyor passes over a screen cleaner system that removes fine dirt and then offloads into a walking trailer that holds 15 cords of firewood.

One man runs each Multitek 2040 firewood processor. A fifth employee operates a John Deere 544 loader, keeping each Multitek machine supplied with logs.

When the trailer is filled, the firewood is taken to proprietary kilns to be dried. The kilns are fueled by sawdust from the company's own Multitek machines as well as sawdust obtained from nearby sawmills.

Three of the Multitek 2040 machines have eight-way splitting wedges. The newest Multitek 2040 machine has a 16-way wedge. The patented 16-way, quad-push pad splitter for bundled wood "saves manpower, which saves time," said Ernie. "It's definitely going to be the way of the future."

Gish Logging is something of a beta test site for the Multitek 2040 with the 16-way wedge, said Ernie. The company is providing Multitek with feedback on how the wedge is performing and how it may be refined.

Ernie and Mike designed much of their own equipment, including some conveyors, the screen cleaner and the kiln system. Mike designed the state-of-the-art facility that houses the drying, bagging and palletizing operations.

Firewood is packaged in two different size bags, 1 cubic foot or three-quarters of a cubic foot. The packages of firewood are palletized and unitized with plastic wrap for shipment to distributors.

Most of the firewood produced by Gish Logging is sold wholesale. The company delivers to all states east of the Mississippi River and is quickly penetrating markets in the West. Gish Logging has four 18-wheelers, but they only provide about 20% of the trucking with other hauling done by contract.

Gish Logging produced 1,158,000 bags of firewood in 2003. Capacity will increase 50% this year, said Ernie, with the addition of a third dry kiln.

Mike designed the company's new 43,000-square-foot facility with an eye toward ultimately ramping up production to

as many as 4 million bags annually. The company also has a 6,000-square-foot maintenance shop.

With volume already high and scheduled to increase even higher, Gish Logging has a good match in the Multitek firewood processors. Both the versatility and strength of the Multitek 2040 series are illustrated in the features of the Multitek Pro Model 2040XP-90 firewood processor.

The Multitek 2040XP-90 has an infeed shuttle grapple carriage to pull the log into the bucking station. The logs are cut to firewood length with a chain saw and then split with the aid of hydraulics. The Multitek can process low-grade hardwood logs as large as 20 inches in diameter and up to 40 feet long, producing 2.5 to 3.5 cords per hour of cut, split firewood with one operator at the controls.

Since all the packaged firewood is kiln dried, Gish Logging has earned U.S. Department of Agriculture certification for firewood that is free of eggs of the gypsy moth and the emerald ash borer. Kiln records document how long the wood has been heated and to what temperature to ensure that any eggs present in the wood have been killed.

Gish Logging literally "backed into" logging, said Ernie. The company originally bought all the logs it needed. Now it conducts its own logging operations to obtain the raw material it requires. The logging operations are equipped with three skidders (two Timberjacks and a Franklin) a Bell feller-buncher, and a Prentice 180 loader.

Gish Logging received the Business of the Year award in 2002 from Franklin County, where its Fort Loudon, Pa. operations

are located. Fort Loudon is situated in the south-central part of the Keystone State, a little under 70 miles from Harrisburg.

Mike's wife, Eloise, is the office manager, and their two sons have roles in the business. Larry 'Junior' Booze supervises the kiln operations and does the work on the company's Web site (www.hotsticks.net). Lauri Rosenberry dispatches nearly 1,000 truckloads annually and also performs computer entry tasks while Ben Meadows serves as national sales manager.

Ernie and Mike belong to the Northeastern Loggers Association and the National Hardwood Lumber Association. Ernie, 58, has been selling firewood for some 30 years. Mike is 40 years old. Both enjoy outdoor activities, including hunting, fishing and hiking.

However, "Our nose has to be kept to the grindstone," said Ernie.

"We're in here 70 to 80 hours per week," added Mike. With the dry kilns running, some times they have to come in Sundays to check on them.

Nevertheless, both men are strongly committed to the business they are growing. Perhaps there is no stronger evidence of their commitment to Gish Logging than the investment they made in the facilities and equipment for kiln drying and packaging. "For the initial, first start up, we spent \$2.4 million," said Mike.

Their value-added approach to the firewood business has strengthened the company, said Ernie. He and Mike routinely consider what they can do to supply a product that will produce more revenue and captures ever-greater market share.



Overview showing three Multitek firewood processors feeding conveyors at Gish Logging's firewood operation.