

## WHAT DO STEEP SLOPE MACHINES MEAN FOR HUMAN FALLERS?

By Ian MacNeill

There isn't much about falling that Graham Schaefer doesn't love. Read his story on page 48.

**D**o the rapid advances in mechanized steep-slope harvesting technology spell the end of the hand faller in the history of forestry in British Columbia?

No. Not by a long shot.

The machines are coming, make no mistake about it. Although they have yet to demonstrate an ability to offer improvements in terms of productivity, it is in terms of promoting safety that they excel, says Rob Moonen Director, SAFE Companies of the BC Forest Safety Council. He reports that the injury rate for fallers in British Columbia in 2014 was a “staggering” 28.9 per cent—roughly three in 10. By contrast, the injury rate for mechanized falling was less than 2 per cent.

However, despite the ability of the machines to tackle ever steeper slopes, they simply can't do it all, and the trees they can't get to are still going to be brought down by hand fallers. In fact, says Dave

Weimer, Chair of the Western Fallers Association, we may even be facing a shortage of fallers in the coming years because the average age of working fallers today is 59. Many of them will retire over the next few years and because an insufficient number of young people are currently engaged in faller training to replace them—fewer than 100 a year are coming into the business according to Weimer—those left are going to be in high demand.

### Here and there, but not everywhere

The view that the machines can't do it all and that there is now and always will be a place for hand fallers is widely held, up to and including at the academic level. According to Kevin Lyons, an associate professor in Forest Operations at UBC, and a man who worked in the woods and felled trees as a young man and has done extensive research at the academic

level on falling, today's mechanized fallers are 30 to 40-ton machines whose operational abilities are restricted by both slope and tree size, including diameter and height. “So even with a grapple saw there's a limitation on what you can do safely, especially when you consider the importance of retaining value in the tree and not just smashing it down,” he says.

He says he views with skepticism the claims that machines are certified to operate on 100 per cent slopes. “Anything over 70 tends to get a little bit crazy.” Anchored machines can, of course, work more difficult terrain, “but then you're only working below the road, and we have a lot of wood that's above the road.” And finally, BC's topography is more challenging in many ways than jurisdictions where the machines have had greater success, particularly Oregon. “We have U-shaped valleys with steep sides, whereas Oregon has more gentle ridges and deeply incised valleys, so it's

not as simple saying a machine certified to 100 per cent can go anywhere.”

None of this comes as revelation to Ted Beutler of Aggressive Timber Falling, a TLA member based in Nanaimo. A lifelong logger who started out cutting shake blocks at the age of 17 before turning to falling, Beutler now runs a company that employs as many as 40 fallers at any given time, and work is never hard to find. “As far as I’m concerned the impact of machine harvesting has already happened, and the equipment being developed to attack steep slopes will only be applicable in very specific situations,” he says. “These machines will never be able to harvest old growth. The wood is too big and heavy; the only way to do it is with hand fallers.” Heli-logging is another area where fallers will continue to be in high demand, he adds.

Rather than fear the rise of the machines, he thinks now is the perfect time for young people to consider falling as a career. “Fallers are going to be in greater demand than ever,” he says. “Numbers are declining due to attrition, mostly as a result of aging, and anyone who comes in can have a bright future. The only reason they’re turning to these machines in the first place is because there aren’t enough fallers to go around anymore. It isn’t a matter of if there is going to be a shortage of fallers, there already is.”

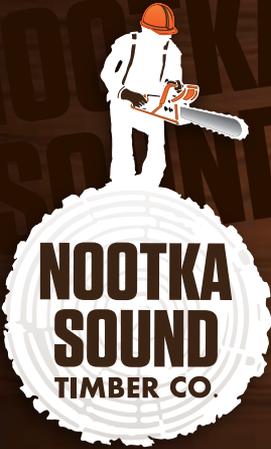
Jordan Nicolussi, president of Sibola Mountain Falling, a TLA member based in Prince George is another whose bullish on the future of hand falling. “We absolutely believe that there is going to be a place for us in the future,” he says confidently. “Machines won’t ever be able to do it all; I’ve yet to see one that could come into the kind of terrain we’re working in, and I’ve definitely never seen one that can go down a rock bluff.”

He adds that flexibility and adaptability are keys to survival. “We’ll fell trees wherever they need to be felled. Our main business is logging, but we do it for mining companies, oil and gas, construction, hydro, anything,” he says, adding that his company is “perfectly situated” to deliver if the much-promised LNG projects move forward.

He also says he gets at least a call a week, sometimes from overseas, from men wanting to break into the business. “As far as I’m concerned, the fallers out there now have nothing to worry about when it comes to getting work.”



Photo submitted: Graham Schaefer



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What does concern him though, is that many already in the business are hearing about the new machines and getting increasingly concerned about their own futures, despite evidence that there will always be a place for hand fallers in the logging equation. "If the goal is safety then it's not a good idea to be putting men who already have a stressful enough job in the position of having to worry about their future, especially when they don't need to be."

Rumors that the days of hand falling are numbered can also have the effect of discouraging young people from considering it as a career, an unintended consequence that could lead to an even greater shortage of qualified fallers in the future.

No one can see into the future or predict what kind of advances will be made when it comes to falling. However, it is safe to say that hand fallers are going to remain an integral and important component of the business, and that many are going to be working in what is likely to be the most difficult ground—the terrain even the most aggressive steep-slope machines won't tackle. Making

that environment as safe as possible is going to be of paramount concern. "As this new technology gets deployed we need to ensure that we are ahead of the curve and are able to supply industry with methods to reduce the risk of fallers being pushed into increasingly dangerous terrain," says Rob Moonen.

It's also worth noting that in situations where hand fallers are replaced by machines, good jobs will open up in the cabs for operators. In fact, says UBC Kevin Lyons, the future may hold some combination of both man and machine, a not implausible notion in a world of rapidly advancing technologies. "It's not inconceivable that technologies will emerge that will allow fallers to do their job more safely. The question, I suppose, is will we call them fallers or machine operators. It's hard to say."

If fallers all became machine operators it would be a sad day for men like Ted Beutler. "There's a lot of chatter in the industry—particularly from the mechanical manufacturers—about how we have to get fallers out of the bush because the work we do is dangerous. However, as fallers, we know our work

is dangerous and we knew it when we signed on, but we don't want to be told by non-fallers we can't do our job because of it. We fallers choose to be fallers and often times feel drawn to the career in the first place.

"There have been great strides within the industry over the past number of years to improve overall hand faller safety," said Beutler. "There are improved training standards, certifications for both fallers and managers, as well as a stringent professional auditing process. None of this was in place only a few years ago. The next generation of hand fallers will be better trained and better managed and they'll have greater support from an improving safety culture within the industry. More than ever before, they'll perform their daily work as safely as possible."

#### **Built for the Job: Graham Schaefer's Story**

There isn't much about falling that Graham Schaefer doesn't like. He loves the smell of sawdust as it swirls around him and the exquisite feeling of satisfaction he gets when he drops a tree exactly where



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he wants it. He loves being a skilled practitioner of a historic BC trade, one that helped build the province. "I hate breaking wood though," he says. "Some of it is more than 500 years old and I figure the least I can do is maximize its value as much as possible."

A small-town boy from Lumby, BC, Schaefer certified in 2009 and has been a production faller with Sibola Mountain Falling for the past two years. He brings to his job the professionalism of a surgeon. "Our day is full of situations you have to learn how to manage—snags, blowdown, shot rock, fog, rain and a million other things—and managing it gives me great satisfaction," he says, adding that he finds he works with applied physics every day, including monumental forces and enormous weight.

"It's kind of funny because I failed physics in high school."

A married man of 32, he says the hardest part is being away from his wife of seven years. "But she's very supportive; I couldn't imagine life without her."

He says he has no concerns about mechanical fallers putting him out of work. "I'd have to see it to believe it," he says. "We deal with sensitive areas, large amounts of rainfall, grades of up to 70 per cent, rock and bluffs, all areas where I question a machine's ability. At this point, I'm not too worried."

And that's a good thing, because working as a production faller has been, quite simply, "one of the best experiences of my life, and I plan to keep on doing it until I'm too old to pull a saw."▲

#### Market Report (Continued from page 15)

to promoting not only cost reduction but also investment in innovation that yields higher value.

If economists can agree on one thing, it is that the role of government is to ensure markets are functioning efficiently. To its credit, the BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations has made some progress in this area by transferring forest tenures to communities and First Nations and creating space for innovation. However, efforts to date are insufficient to shift the balance of power from the hands of the few to the hands of many. A broader effort to redistribute harvesting rights through a fair, equitable buyback of forest tenures is one option to stimulate competition and create new opportunities for a larger number of small- and medium-sized businesses, including First Nations- and community-owned enterprises.

Current distortions in the coast forest industry are hampering investment and much-needed growth. Until major restructuring of the forest tenure system takes place, there is little place for innovation to take root, and any efforts to stimulate investment in the industry will have limited effect.▲

*Harry Nelson is an Assistant Professor within UBC's Faculty of Forestry. His research interest is in analyzing natural and environmental resource policy with an emphasis on forestry and in developing new policy options that can help enhance the long run sustainability of Canadian forests and the communities and businesses that rely upon them. Harry has provided advice on forest policy and trade issues to the federal government, various provincial governments, industry associations, forest sector firms and First Nations among others. He can be reached at 604.827.3478 or [harry.nelson@ubc.ca](mailto:harry.nelson@ubc.ca).*

*Ngaio Hotte is a Resource Economist & Facilitator with Resource Economics Group and a doctoral student in the Faculty of Forestry at UBC. Her current research focuses on how trust is created between First Nations, federal and/or provincial governments in the context of collaborative natural resource management. Other major projects have focused on economic impact and value analysis in the forest, fishing and tourism industries and facilitation of multi-stakeholder dialogue. She can be reached at [info@resource-economics.ca](mailto:info@resource-economics.ca).*

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