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Biological woodsmen give watershed's forests a helping hoof

When loggers use horse sense to select trees for harvest, both tract, its owners are winners

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Jason Rutledge, right, owner of the Environmentally Sensitive Logging and Lumber Co., is one of a handful of “horse loggers” in the region. He and his son Jagger demonstrate how using animals and considering the forest as a whole when selecting which trees to cut will lead to healthier woodlots.

Jason Rutledge’s Suffolk Punch draft horses leave behind few signs of impact on the forest. He and his workers manage a woodland’s health by cutting lumber of various quality instead only the high-value trees. The harvested logs have different destinations, end product usage and market value.

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By Karl Blankenship

In the woods of northern Virginia, Jason Rutledge is working on changing human behavior—with horses.

He and his crew work their way through woodlots, selecting the worst trees they can find, then cutting them down and hauling them away with a team of horses.

What's left behind, Rutledge says, is a healthier forest and—thanks to the careful step of his horses—little sign of disturbance. Not only do many of the trees remain, but there are no ruts and tire tracks associated with traditional logging operations.

“We are changing human behavior by training practitioners who practice a different form of forestry,” said Rutledge, owner of the Environmentally Sensitive Logging and Lumber Co., one of a handful of “horse loggers” in the region.

His operation may look like a page out of the past, but it is, Rutledge explained, “modern” horse logging. The horses use nylon harnesses to pull logs through the woods, and have “high tech” shoes to give them a good grip on the ground.

And Rutledge said his crew are not lumberjacks, but rather “biological woodsmen” who are trained to not just look at the value of the logs, but also that of the forest as a whole.

“This is really bottom-up change,” Rutledge said. “This is about educating the ground-level worker with the skills and knowledge to be able to assess the natural resources, and with the ethics of knowing why it is the right thing to do—the greatest reward of it being the dignity that we all feel of leaving the woods like this.

“Not to mention,” he added, “the pleasure of working with animals.”

Rutledge is also president of the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation, a nonprofit organization, which is being supported by a Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grant to help train others in his low-impact techniques are good for the Bay.

Besides reducing erosion and disturbance to the ground, the cutting techniques used by Rutledge could encourage the growing number of people who own small forested tracts to more actively manage their lands.

On average, forests release fewer nutrients than any other land use, but some estimates suggest the Bay watershed may be losing forests at the rate of 100 acres a day. Foresters believe that rate of loss could be stemmed if small woodlot owners realize there is value in managing their lands—and keeping them in forest.

“You have to have that income to the landowner in order to make it worth their while to keep it and not sell it to the developer down the way who will offer them 10 times more,” said Mike Foreman of the Virginia Department of Forestry.

Traditional logging operations typically use heavy equipment to haul the logs from large-scale operations. Costs, and the logistics of moving 10,000-pound trucks, often lead to the clear-cutting of tracts, which are left to regrow on their own.

Owners of small woodlots often don't want their tracts clear-cut. As a result, small forest tracts often go unmanaged, bringing no income to their owners.

Equally bad, some crews that selectively cut small tracts take only the best trees—a practice known as “high grading”—and leave behind low-value trees that diminish any potential future profit.

Foreman said it's unlikely that horse logging will roll back the clock on forestry. But he said it may be a growing niche market ideally suited to meet the needs of property owners in a landscape where forests are fragmented into small tracts.

Rutledge was working on a 30-acre tract owned by Birney Robert outside Warrenton. Robert knew it was time for the land, which she manages as a wildlife sanctuary, to be cut—but she didn't want it clear-cut.

When she heard from a friend about a demonstration being put on by Rutledge and his crew, Robert took a look and was thrilled by the low-impact approach of the biological woodsmen. "I was just delighted to find this group," she said. "I liked their philosophy of taking the worst first and giving the good ones the most chance."

Rutledge's horses leave behind little sign of impact on the land—the skid trails from dragged logs resemble hiking paths rather than logging roads. The horses easily weave logs between trees, rather than hitting and damaging those left standing as might happen with larger equipment.

Animal-powered logging—some outfits prefer mules or oxen—is catching on in other areas of the country as well, largely to reduce the impact on lands still trying to heal from massive clear-cutting a century ago. Rutledge said he has received inquiries from England, Russia, China and New Zealand about horse logging.

The advantage of the low-impact horse logging is particularly evident on steep slopes, where heavy equipment can lead to severe erosion and stream degradation. Rutledge, in fact, started his operation in the mountains of Appalachia, but has most recently been working in northern Virginia, which is filled with small woodlots that have not been harvested for decades.

"We are working in a region where landowners are extremely recalcitrant about any harvesting activities," Rutledge said. "They won't accept even-age management. So we have a lot of forests that haven't had any extraction for about 50 years."

As a practical matter, Foreman said a small logging operation didn't necessarily need to rely on horses. "A small piece of equipment can do the same thing in other places," he said. But the horses are effective at catching the public's attention—especially in Northern Virginia's horse country. "People fall in love with that," Foreman said.

In that regard, Rutledge's horses are especially appealing. He uses Suffolk Punch draft horses, which have been bred for work in Britain for centuries. Today, with their work nearly replaced by tractors and other equipment, they are one of the rarest breeds; only about 500 of the animals live in the United States. "They are rare because they are a strictly functional horse," Rutledge said. "They are not a showy horse. They are not Budweiser Clydesdales. But they will pull anything that you hook them to. They love to work."

But horse logging itself is not by definition low impact. A logger using a team of horses could still practice high grading or haul logs in ways that increase erosion. That's why Rutledge emphasizes the need to train the next generation to be biological woodsmen rather

than loggers.

His crews learn to cut trees in ways that ensure “soft landings,” which minimize damage to the ground and avoid striking—and damaging—trees that are being left behind. They take the worst trees first—those that are diseased, poor quality or shading more valuable trees—leaving the best trees to grow.

“The forest responds to that amazingly,” Rutledge said. “It grows very, very quickly. It is not only that the remaining trees grow faster, but because they are the best trees, they are growing more timber. So the rate of return is off the scale.”

Rutledge reaps those benefits in future years when he returns to the site. He operates under perpetual harvest agreements that allow his crews the first right to return to the land for any future management.

In the meantime, his crews make the most of the poorer quality trees coming out by learning to grade each log the horses haul out. Rather than all going to the same saw mill or pulp processor, some low-grade logs will be used for railroad ties, while higher quality ones may be marketed for use in furniture, flooring or cabinets.

“What you see here is not just a pile of logs,” Rutledge said, standing atop the day’s harvest. “It is many piles of logs, all of which have a different destination and end product usage and market value.”

Making a living through such techniques can be challenging. But it is easier for people to get into animal-powered logging. Startup costs for a horse-logging operation, according to the University of Kentucky, is about \$10,000 versus \$100,000 for a conventional logging operation.

“A lot of people love it,” said Rutledge’s son, Jagger. “But the fact is, we’re just out here trying to make a living—and making a living doing something that you love, and having a positive impact on the world in our own niche.”

Karl is the Editor of the Bay Journal.

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