

Hitchhiker's guide to success

By Tony Kryzanowski



Danny Dion hitchhiked his way to Alberta many years ago, but this former Quebecer is now running a multimillion dollar timber salvage business, with some 80 pieces of logging and mulching equipment.

Since 1997 it's been practically impossible to miss a large sign heading into Bonnyville, Alberta, a booming community in the midst of the province's heavy oil industry. That sign pictures a bear holding two chainsaws next to the name "Bear Slashing Ltd." Even then, as the company was just getting started in the mechanical timber salvage and mulching business, company owner Danny Dion was already thinking big.

Danny Dion, owner of Bear Slashing Ltd, finds that his company's services are in high demand these days from the Alberta oil patch.

At that time the company had five pieces of equipment. Today the company owns 80 pieces of logging and mulching equipment and has annual revenue exceeding \$10 million. This includes a Tigercat 860C feller buncher, a John Deere 753G zero tail swing feller buncher, a John Deere 903 feller buncher, a 618 and a 628 Timberjack feller buncher, a John Deere 68G III skidder, a John Deere 78G skidder, three 78G III skidders, a Tigercat 620C skidder, as well as a Komatsu 220 carrier, Caterpillar 325 carrier, and a John Deere 205_ carrier, all with Lim-mit 2000 delimiters. The logging equipment complements the 62 mulchers in the company's expanding fleet.

Quite an accomplishment for a French Canadian from Chibougamau, Quebec, who didn't speak English when—at age 21—he decided to hitchhike with a bilingual friend to Alberta. They landed jobs working 18 hours a day as farmhands in Worsley, Alberta, where, according to Dion, catching a chicken for your supper each night was routine.

That was 1981. Today, his company, Bear Slashing, has a brand new 5,000 square-foot head office in Bonnyville and the company's services are in high demand from the oil patch. The choice on the menu at suppertime is a little bigger these days.

Bear Slashing offers salvage logging, mulching and log transport services primarily to the oil and gas industry. Over the past decade it has been involved in salvaging logs from some of the largest heavy oil processing plant sites near Fort McMurray, not to mention hundreds of oil and gas leases and thousands of seismic lines throughout northeastern Alberta. The company cleared a 250-hectare site for Suncor and will soon be involved in salvaging timber from a number of major pipeline projects.

It has experienced tremendous growth, especially over the past three years, says company general manager Russ Dixon. Bear Slashing added 30 pieces of equipment to its fleet last winter alone to keep up with demand.

"It's been a big stretch for the whole company," says Dixon. "We've definitely experienced growing pains, but we believe progress is good. Most of the oil companies have adopted the mulching.



Over the past decade, Bear Slashing has been involved in salvaging logs from some of the largest heavy oil processing plant sites near Fort McMurray, Alberta, on top of salvaging wood from hundreds of oil and gas leases.

approach to fibre management and our logging equipment works hand in hand with our mulchers.”

Dion was no rookie to log salvaging and fibre management for the oil patch when he established Bear Slashing. He landed his first job as a skidder

operator through a chance meeting with a logger at a New Year’s Eve party in 1982. He quickly progressed to other areas including working as a chainsaw and skidder operator in a cone-picking operation, followed by a short stint pounding spikes for CN Rail. Dion then settled in for several years as a seasonal chainsaw operator for BAD Slashers, and doing heliportable hand cutting for Adrien Erickson Line Clean-up.

This particular line of work involved cutting seismic lines in the jagged terrain of the Rocky Mountains throughout Alberta and British Columbia. This is when Dion met up with Dixon, as Dion was Dixon’s foreman on a heliportable chainsaw crew.

With the seasonal nature of clearing seismic lines, Dion worked in road construction in the summer and earned valuable experience operating various types of heavy equipment. In 1988, he launched Bear Slashing with a partner, but was on his own within a few months. Shortly after, he purchased his first mulcher, a device that had never been used before in Alberta’s oil and gas industry.

Despite a multitude of mechanical breakdowns with those early models, Dion realized that mulching was a more environmentally friendly approach to seismic line, road and oilfield lease clearing. New provincial government regulations called for narrower seismic lines as well as more stringent environmentally conscious solutions to brush pile burning, providing a further boost to the business.

Improved mulching technology, an oil and gas boom, changing environmental regulations, plenty of experience, and Dion’s belief in the need to “go big or go home” have all contributed to Bear Slashing’s success.

The company has 175 employees during the peak winter season. Most work is conducted in the winter months when there is enough frost in the muskeg-laden terrain in northeastern Alberta to allow heavy equipment to access the area without sinking out of sight.

The company knew what it wanted when it came to purchasing its logging equipment. Dixon says the 360 degree rotation on the heads mounted on the Tigercat 860C and John Deere 903 feller bunchers, as well as zero tail swing on the John Deere 753G unit, provides the operator with the ability to set the wood down more easily within a confined space.

“It seems that the pipeline easements are getting narrower and narrower,” says Dixon. “There’s a lot of 10-metre wide stuff out there.”

The zero tail swing John Deere feller buncher is also highly productive in this environment, and has been equipped with 36-inch pads so that it can walk across softer ground in the muskeg.

One of the main challenges of log salvage in the oil patch is that seismic lines and roads typically travel in a straight line, meaning that the log salvage company must have equipment capable of operating in a wide variety of ground conditions.

Having the ability to efficiently salvage the timber is also a consideration. Bear Slashing equipped its John Deere 753G feller buncher with a 22-inch head with a distinct purpose in mind. “The head is a bit big for this smaller machine, but in this country, we’ve got a lot of small timber,” Dixon says. “A bigger head allows you to accumulate more wood.”

In terms of equipment brands, Bear Slashing bases its purchasing decisions on proven reliability—an important factor when working in remote locations. It has five well-equipped shop vans working in the field to keep its equipment operating and to minimize downtime. By planning equipment purchases with compatibility in mind, fewer parts are required in inventory.

Dixon, a former feller buncher operator himself, sets a target for his operators of about four to five hectares of production per 10-hour shift. The delimeter follows in behind the feller buncher, leaving the branches scattered on the lease site. The delimbed, tree-length logs are also sawn to specific lengths to meet mill standards before they are skidded to a landing that is typically located off to the side of the lease access road. By keeping the log deck clear of the roadway, safe access by other oilfield equipment that may be using the site is ensured. Residual wood and branches left on the lease site after delimiting are devoured by the mulchers, leaving a clear site without any need for burning.

The logs salvaged by Bear Slashing belong to the contracting oil company, but are typically sold to Al-Pac or Northland Forest Products in Fort McMurray.

Dixon says the biggest challenge to operating the business is trying to meet all their clients’ needs during the relatively short winter season.

“We have to have enough equipment to keep everyone happy,” says Dixon, “and do what work we can for our clients from October to the middle of March. Mother Nature likes to change it up a bit each year and keep us on our toes.”

While many companies in Alberta are having difficulty finding employees, Dixon says the seasonality of Bear Slashing’s business has actually worked to its advantage. A few years ago, the company hired a truck driver from New Brunswick. Since then, he has recruited many seasonal workers from New Brunswick to operate equipment for Bear Slashing.

Many are fishing boat owner/operators who fish in the summer and operate equipment in Alberta over the winter.

This balance means they are employed all year but aren’t forced to uproot their families, homes and established fishing businesses on the East Coast. Dixon’s ability to speak French is also an advantage, since many workers from New Brunswick are French-speaking.

“We’re starting to look after them a bit better, like offering to pay their flight up or pay for a flight home at Christmas time,” says Dixon. “Our employees really appreciate that and employee retention is a big consideration for everyone right now.” The company also rents local apartments, each capable of housing up to four workers on a temporary basis. This allows for workers from the East Coast to have a “home” to come back to during their days off.

Dion's business success has come as no surprise to Dixon, who, along with four other core employees, have watched and been a part of Dion's rise to business prominence. Dixon started out as a chainsaw operator, then progressed to operating equipment, becoming skilled at handling a wide variety of machinery. He still proclaims an affinity for the feller buncher.

Dixon sustained some serious injuries in a house fire years ago, and although well recovered now, he did go through a long period of time where work in the field just wasn't possible. Dion saw past these temporary limitations and had a view of the big picture, offering Dixon work at the management level.

For the past five years, Dixon has been the company general manager, working from the Bonnyville office. He typically starts work at 7:00 am, and more often than not, locks up the office when everyone else has gone home for the day.

That dependability from his right hand man has allowed Dion the freedom to pursue his other well known passion: race horses. "Danny's goal is to own a racehorse that wins the Kentucky Derby," says Dixon. "I have a strong belief that he will do it."



