

# EUP Logging Workforce Shrinks as Tree Harvesting Technology Advances



The saw on a tree harvester operated by Douglas Littlejohn cuts through a tree trunk in northern St. Ignace Township. The harvester can cut down a tree, cut off its limbs, and divide the trunk into eight-foot sections in 20 to 40 seconds, depending on the size of the tree.



View inside the cockpit of a tree harvester used by Nelson Logging. The operator uses two foot pedals, and two joysticks, with 18 buttons each, to control the movement of the harvester.



Douglas Littlejohn stands next to a tree harvester he operates for Rexton-based logging company Nelson Logging. One tree harvester can do the work of about 10 loggers with chain saws.

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thing," he said. An operator in training can learn the controls in about six months, he said, but should really operate the machine in all types of weather, in all four seasons, before claiming proficiency.

**What is a tree harvester?**

The harvester is the most important piece of equipment in a logging operation. A tracked vehicle with a rotating cab, it looks a little like a steamshovel or crane, but has a hydraulic arm that comes over its back, like a scorpion's tail, and is able to grab trees 30 feet away.

On the end of this arm is an eight-foot tall, five-foot wide, automated cutting head that can cut down a tree, de-branch it, and slice the trunk into eight-foot sections in a matter of seconds.

The top of this cutting head has two curved, hydraulic-powered, insect-like, pinchers, that grab onto the tree trunk. The edges of these pinchers are sharpened so that when a tree is forced through them at high speeds, its branches are cleanly cut off.

In the middle of the cutting head are two spiked, foot-wide, steel rollers that dig into each side of a tree trunk to move it through the head.

The bottom of the head has one curved arm, similar to the two at the top, that provides extra grip when the head latches onto a tree. Right below that bottom arm is a chainsaw about five feet long that cuts effortlessly through the trunk of a tree.

Mr. Littlejohn uses two joystick controllers with 19 buttons and settings each to manipulate the cutting

head to grab a tree as far down on the trunk as possible and cut it at the base. He then uses the joysticks to twist the cutting head and bring the tree crashing to the ground.

A small computer-controlled roller measures the length of the trunk as it's fed through the cutting head. The computer is pre-programmed to measure eight feet before lowering the razor-sharp saw to cut the tree into eight-foot logs.

The whole process takes about 20 to 40 seconds, depending on the size of the tree and skill of the operator.

Mr. Littlejohn quickly moves from tree to tree, leaving piles of logs to be picked up by a skidder.

A skidder is a large, tractor-like machine outfitted with a hydraulic grapple and a "basket" to move the logs around the job site. Logs are stacked in piles, depending on the type of wood, before being hauled away to the mill on a semi.

The Nelson Logging crew produces an average of about 35 cords of wood a day, a volume of 128 cubic feet, before sending the logs off to a mill.

They are harvesting aspen, spruce, and balsam fir on their current job site, which will be sent to five different mills, St. Marys Paper in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Louisiana Pacific in Newberry, Verso Quinnesec Mill in Quinnesec, New Page Paper in Escanaba, and Timber Products in Munising. Other types of tree species harvested in the EUP include jack pine, red pine, and white pine.

The process to harvest trees from public forest land takes a couple of years, said Martha Sjogren, Timber Sales Forester for the U.S. Forest



The tree harvester used by Nelson Logging.

Service at the Hiawatha National Forest station in St. Ignace.

The Forest Service performs a series of environmental impact surveys for rare plants and animals, which can take about a year to complete, before selling the trees to logging companies. The companies are allowed time, sometimes up to five years depending on the contract, to process and remove the timber, she said.

"That gives the purchaser time to plan their own work" and work around their own schedules, she

said.

**The need for wood and loggers decreases as trees continue to grow**

A lot of money is required for a logging company to purchase a new harvester or skidder. Mr. Nelson's harvester, which is about a year old, cost more than \$450,000, and the skidder cost about \$200,000 several years ago.

This high cost of new equipment is dissuading new logging companies from forming and new loggers from entering the industry.

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