

Mutual Benefits

■ Symbiotic relationships abound in and out of the forest.

By Teresa Hannah,
Caribou Software

The forest is full of mutually symbiotic relationships, like lichens in the forest helping with soil formation, or bees helping to pollinate flowers, just to pick two simple and well-known examples. But it turns out that such mutually beneficial relationships can also happen outside the woods, as the folks from Plains Logging (based in Washington, Ga.) and Caribou Software can attest.

Their relationship dates back more than a decade, when Plains first adopted Caribou's Logger's Edge software. Both companies have been instrumental in each other's expansion, both have encouraged the other to try new things, and both continue to rely on each other's support and input.

Plains was a relatively early customer in Caribou's Southeast U.S. history, and has been very instrumental in helping Caribou to expand its customer base in Georgia from eight in 2006, when Plains first adopted Caribou's Logger's Edge, to nearly 50 now. And according to Amy Coleman, the office manager at Plains Logging, Caribou's various systems have been instrumental in their expansion as well. "With our operation being so large now, there is no way we could be functioning without this type of software in place," she asserts. "We had outgrown all our previous software systems, which is the reason we changed over to Caribou in 2006. There is so much room for continued growth and functions within the program that we are learning yearly and implementing, even now after 10 years with Caribou."

The Logger's Edge has become an integral part of the work lives for the office staff at Plains Logging. It is used every single day of the week for everything from generating payments to landowners, contractors, and employees to reconciling revenue each week and tracking unpaid tickets to generating Georgia Timber tax forms and 1099 forms at year-end. "Being able to process timber tax forms and 1099S forms at year-end are enough of a cost/benefit within

themselves to make the program appealing," Amy says. "Plus, the ease of entering information one time and being able to get multiple reports streamlines our process tremendously. Having to key information multiple times, copy formulas over from one spreadsheet to another, etc., allows much room for errors across the board. The software program eliminates such errors."

And it's not just the office staff that relies on Caribou's systems. About a year after Plains came on board with the Logger's Edge, they adopted Caribou's Mechanic's Edge system as well. Their initial motivation was the need for a point-of-sales system for their company store to help manage the sale of equipment parts and services, but they intended eventually to use it to manage the scheduled maintenance on their own equipment fleet. Their store manager, Kenny Stewart, was pretty hesitant about learning a new software system, but he was committed to the process. Now he knows the Mechanic's Edge like the back of his hand.

As it often goes, other parts of the business took priority for a number of years, but Plains did, in fact, accomplish its goal of implementing the maintenance tracking functionality about two years ago. "We've really enjoyed working with the Mechanic's Edge," says James Coleman, one of three

brothers who are taking over the business from their father, William. "I don't know why we didn't get it all set up in the beginning. It has been a great asset, and makes it so much easier to keep up with the machine hours and what services are coming due. Plus, we don't have to look back anymore at old invoices and paper files to figure out what was done on a particular unit."

To his credit, James put a great deal of time and effort into building out his service schedules and getting all the current machine hours and truck miles logged in the software. But once the main setup work was done, it was easy to stay on top

with the corresponding mill ticket to ensure all loads were accounted for. The Suzie Logger Android tablet app has essentially allowed them to eliminate their sticker system and has also allowed them to eliminate all the pre-printed authorization sheets that they used to print for use in the woods for those mills that required them.

The cutter man or loader man enters each load into Suzie, using pre-populated drop downs and pick lists that have been synchronized from the Logger's Edge. The Suzie system is smart enough to autofill the authorization numbers assigned by the various mills depending on the setup information entered back in the office. Suzie Logger can then print out a small trip ticket for the driver to carry to the mill. In cases where the mill requires the authorization numbers to be bar-coded, Suzie can accommodate that as well. Plus, those loads are sent up electronically to the Logger's Edge database to avoid the need for rekeying tickets.

Although Plains has, to date, only implemented it with one crew, they have plans to introduce it to their other crews over time. "It's taken some getting used to, but we feel that we are on the right path to really get the full benefit of Suzie now," Amy says. "I have to work with the guys much more closely on the timing. They need to give me enough notice of moving onto a new tract so that I can get trip



Caribou's lead developer and part owner, Bob Lucke, at the Southeastern Wood Producer's Annual Meeting in Waycross, Ga, in March 2018.



Plains Logging loader operator Eric Leslie, using Caribou's Suzie app for handheld devices

of things from there. As James says, "We've got it working to a T!"

In Woods

In recent years, Plains has even extended their use of software right on out to the woods, replacing their daily paper log sheets and hand-written trip ticket/sticker system with Caribou's Suzie Logger app for one of the company crews, the one that Grant Coleman heads. Plains had developed a meticulous manual tracking system for accounting for each and every load in the woods, using a sticker system to match each load

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mileages and authorization numbers into the Logger's Edge, so that Grant can download the data into Suzie before they start loading the trucks." But the benefits are there if they can stay on top of the information sharing. "It speeds up the process by not having to enter all the information for each load like we do for all the others crews. It's also helped out with managing our quotas better because we can easily see on a day-by-day basis how many of that crew's loads have gone to each mill."

Innovative Input

The folks at Plains Logging are an innovative group of business people, always thinking about ways to improve their business and never afraid of introducing new technology—and even conceiving of *new* tools, if they think it can enhance efficiency.

About two years ago, on one of Caribou's visits to the old U.S. Post Office in White Plains, Ga. that now serves as Plains Logging's head office, the three brothers, James, Grant and Allen, along with family patriarch William Coleman, met with Caribou. The Colemans proceeded to describe their vision of a tool that

would be integrated with the Logger's Edge, and that would let them keep track visually on a map of all the various tracts of timber they have purchased. They wanted to be able to query the tool in various ways to make decisions about which tracts to harvest when, depending on the needs of the mills. And they wanted it integrated with Georgia's "QPublic" website so that detailed tract maps and parcel numbers were only a click away.

"The guys at Plains really had a clear vision of what they wanted, and the business reasons why they wanted it," says Bob Lucke, one of the owners at Caribou who met with the Colemans. "Given the number of tracts of timber they purchase, and the challenge of optimizing harvest decisions based on multiple factors like the mills' fiber requirements, the distance to the mills and the expiry dates on the contracts, it was clear that keeping track of it all in their heads was no longer feasible."

Engaging Caribou to build a custom system for them was no small

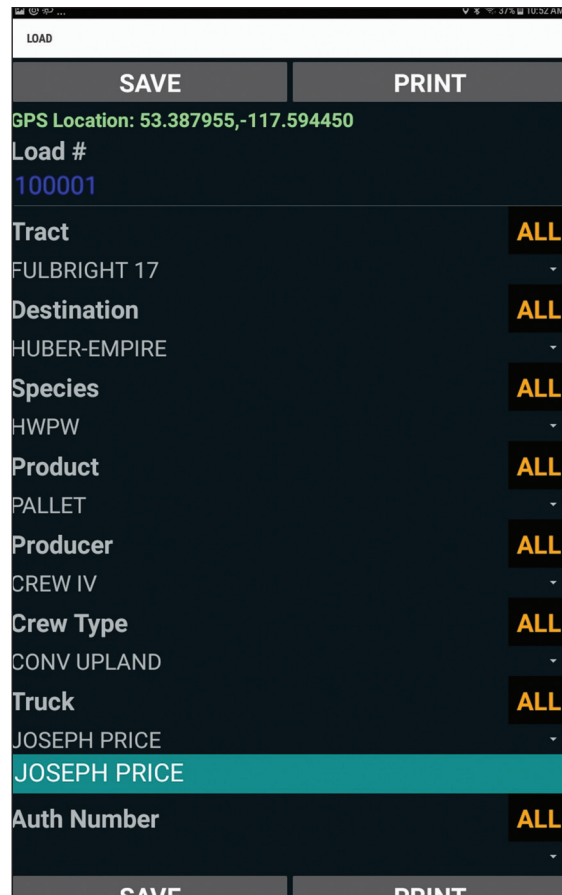
investment, but with the volume of timber they purchase, they decided

the cost-benefit ratio was sound. Their vision pushed Caribou to learn new technology tools that allowed for the integration of a Google maps interface to sit on top of the Logger's Edge database where the longitude and latitude data were entered for each tract. By combining the physical tract location information with the product cruise and other tract information, the "Tract Map-It" software tool was born.

Amy summed it up nicely: "We have worked with Caribou on multiple customized reports and other changes that not just any software company would be willing to do for their customers. We feel that our feedback on changes we would like to see are truly appreciated and tested for future versions released."

And that is what makes this relationship between Caribou and Plains such a mutually beneficial one: they both keep encouraging the other to evolve, to adapt, and to try new things as the market environment and technological landscape changes.

SLT



Loader operators enter their loads on the Suzie app using a tablet or phone to replace paper load sheets. They can print trip tickets for the trucker, complete with bar codes for select mills.