From Woods To Office: Ticket Tracking Gone Digital

For logging contractors hauling thousands of truckloads of timber a year, ranging in value from $500 to $1,500 or more, it's remarkable in this age how manual that process still is. And it's remarkable how fraught with error it can be. Here's how one logging contractor in Minnesota addressed that problem.

For most logging companies, the ticket tracking process goes something like this: The loader operator fills out a manual load sheet, listing each load he loaded that day, what type of wood it was, what truck (or trailer) he is loading, and the mill to which the load is destined. Some companies have pre-printed ticket books with unique load ticket numbers that the loader also fills out with information about the load. That "woods ticket number" essentially serves as a security ticket number so that each load leaving the woods has a unique number that can then be accounted for during the final reconciliation process.

The truck driver then takes the hand-written woods ticket, which serves as a bill of lading, to the mill and the scale attendant must decipher the hand-written scrawl on the paper tickets so they can re-enter it into their weigh scale system, at which point a mill ticket number is assigned, the weights are captured, and a mill ticket is printed.

If all goes well, the driver staples his copy of the mill ticket to his hand-written load ticket and those tickets make their way to the contractor's office. At that point, the load has to be entered another time, often into one or more Excel spreadsheets or some type of office database, so that the contractor can ensure they are paid for each load, and that they can in turn pay their landowners and contractors for the tickets.

Up until a couple years ago, Carlson Timber of Sandstone, Minn. followed a similar type of process. Carlson runs four logging crews and has roughly 20 of their own truck drivers. While they have not completely automated the ticket tracking process, they have certainly made good strides in that direction.

In the office Carlson uses Caribou's Logger's Edge Software, which allows them to set up all the jobs with the corresponding delivered prices as well as landowner and trucker pay rates. That system is the central system where all the product, destination, truck, and other setup lists are maintained. The Loggers' Edge is where all load ticket data are stored and processed to auto-create the pay statements, revenue reconciliation reports, and job profit and production reports each week.

In the woods, each of the crews now has an Android tablet that runs Caribou's "E-Logger." If a crew moves onto a new job or starts working for a new mill, that information gets entered into the Logger's Edge, and then the trucker or crew supervisor simply taps a button on his app to "Get the Latest setup Data" while he's still in cell range.

When a trucker arrives on a job site, he enters his load into the E-Logger, which they generally keep in a crew cab at the job site. The device assigns a unique sequential load ticket number, a time stamp, and a GPS coordinate automatically, and he simply selects the job, mill, etc. using the pre-populated drop-down lists on his app. He can then print multiple copies of his ticket to a portable blue-tooth receipt printer. He provides one of the copies to the scale attendant at the receiving mill when he arrives. The mills like the pre-printed tickets because they are much easier to read and much more professional than the hand-scrawled alternative.

When the driver leaves the mill, he attaches the mill's ticket printout to the ticket printed in the woods so that the weight information now accompanies the woods ticket. Those tickets are dropped off back at the office, usually at the end of the week. In the meantime, though, the crew foreman can hit the "Send" button on the E-Logger app at the end of each day, or multiple times in the day if cell coverage allows, and those tickets are visible in the Logger's Edge system back in the office almost immediately.

That daily visibility really helps the managers stay on top of mill quo-
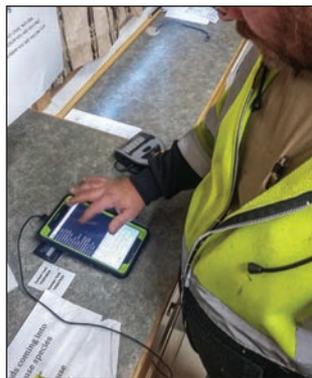
Android tablet-based system boosts efficiency, reduces errors.

tas much more effectively, and it helps them identify potential operational issues or bottlenecks in the woods on a more timely basis. Before the introduction of the Caribou system, the ticket information often did not get entered until the end of the week, and by then it was too late to address operational problems or adjust deliveries for quota.

Carlson also has a wood yard at their location where they receive incoming loads. Their weigh scale system prints a basic ticket with the date and weights, and they then have a dedicated Android table available in the office so that when the truckers come in, they simply enter their ticket information directly into the handheld. Those loads can then be sent up to the Logger's Edge, eliminating the step of having to re-enter illegible and sometimes incomplete hand-written tickets.

The new system has cut the ticket entry and payment/reconciliation time by more than half. Missy Jorgenson, the log manager for Carlson, says that she can complete her load weight entry and reconciliation and payment process in a day, as compared to the three days she used to spend entering and processing tickets. Part of that time savings is due to automation, but the other part of it is error reduction.

According to Missy: "The drivers make way fewer mistakes using the App then when they filled out manual tickets. The drop-downs help their accuracy and force them not to skip a required data item. And the drivers pick it up really easily. It's so simple – we love it!"   **TH**

Article and photos submitted by Caribou Software, Inc. caribousoftware.com.