

SAWMILL FORUM

CASEY
CREAMER

SAW
DOCTOR



Trends, from one saw doctor's perspective.

I have seen a number of trends in the past few years that I would definitely consider to be worth watching in the new year. For starters, just as the whole world has become more and more Internet-dependent, sawmillers have finally jumped on that bandwagon and now many of them consider the Internet to be a useful tool for finding information and potential suppliers. I wouldn't say that all of the mills in the Northeast have caught up with other industries in their use of the Internet, but the trend is there and it is coming fast.

Some people think of trends in terms of what is likely to happen in the coming year. I think of trends more in terms of what has been happening in the last few years and therefore how much of that is likely to continue for the next few years.

Many of the larger mills in the Northeast were small or medium sized operations when I started working with them. The trend among these larger mills has been--and continues to be--to convert from mainly using a circular headrig to a band headrig. On their journey from small or medium to large they have already added band line bar resaws and have been able to achieve real growth as a result. So it must seem natural to them to move one step further and install a band headrig.

I disagree with this move, not because circular saws are my thing, but because I believe that the inserted tooth circular saw is better suited to the job that a head saw has to do. I certainly agree that bands are the way to go in a resaw application and I've been preaching for years that the head rig should only be used to square up a log enough so that it is presentable to a resaw. Having the head saw do more than that is just plain inefficient.

The head saw application is quite abusive. You have a round log that isn't perfectly round, with all sorts of obstacles like knots and bell butts. Because the log isn't really round, it can often move laterally or roll a little while in the cut. And because of its irregular shape, the teeth are often not seeing the cut evenly. In other words, when each tooth enters the cut, both corners don't hit at exactly the same time because of the

curvature of the log. This can cause quite a bit of instability at the rim of the saw as one corner tends to bite just a little ahead of the other corner of the tooth.

Sure, circular saws generate more sawdust than band saws, but in the headrig application that extra sawdust should be coming out of your slabs anyway.

By using a band saw on your headrig, you now have a tool that is a lot less forgiving than the average inserted tooth circular saw--not to mention the added maintenance that a band saw requires as compared to a circular saw. Of course in the resaw application, that added maintenance is easily offset and overcome by the production you gain by making less sawdust. What do you gain at the head rig? Of course some mill people tell me that they do take a few boards with their band headrig so that they can get the cant to be the right size to fit into their resaw. Well, then why didn't you just replace your current resaw with a bigger one? That would have been cheaper than putting in a new band head rig and all of the added maintenance that comes along for the ride.

Of course the bottom line is that in spite of what I think, these mills went ahead and made the change and as a result, they seem to be plenty profitable. So what do I know?

I have also seen a relatively recent trend towards the real small mills. These include farm mills, some hobby mills, and some small businesses who intend to stay fairly small, getting rid of their old worn out hand set circular mills to put in the newer small, portable narrow bandmills. Personally I am not a big fan of these small portable bandmills. And of course, since many of them aren't really in it as a fulltime business, it is quite hard to measure their success or lack thereof.

But I can tell you that some of these folks were plenty reluctant to invest as little as \$5,000 rebuilding worn parts of their mill and upgrading to new blades. Now they plunk down much more money to buy a portable mill that is nowhere near as capable of the lumber production that even an old, worn out handset mill can do with a little bit of rebuilding. Sure, those narrow bands take out much less sawdust, but

how much money can you save with the limited production levels of these machines?

Now that leaves us a lot of small to medium size mills in our region. I am talking about mills that put out 5,000 to 20,000 board feet a day. This is probably not a surprise to anyone reading this magazine, but in the past couple of years the trends for those mills has been to partially shut down, close the doors, and/or go to the auction block. Obviously that is an alarming trend for me because they represent the largest segment of my customer base.

What will the future bring? The current economic crisis isn't local, regional or even national. It is truly global and as such it will be with us for awhile. Sawmills—large and small—are going to have to find even more ways to become more efficient and adapt to new realities in the marketplace if they want to be around to enjoy the recovery.

Questions about sawmills and their operation should be sent to Forum, The Northern Logger, P.O. Box 69, Old Forge, NY 13420, FAX #315-369-3736.

The author is a saw doctor and president of Seneca SawWorks, Inc., P.O. Box 681, Burdett, NY 14818, tel. (607) 546-5887, email casey@senecasaw.com.



The trend towards band headrigs continues unabated.