

KNAEBLE TIMBER, INC.

Family-owned company considered one of the elite names in the Minnesota forestry industry



Kevin Knaeble,
co-owner

The Knaeble name is well-known to people involved in the thriving forestry industry in northern Minnesota. After all, three generations of the Knaeble family have been in the logging business for 70 years in the area. Today, Knaeble Timber, Inc.'s co-owners Kevin Knaeble and his wife Khris believe the company's excellent reputation has vaulted it into the upper echelon of Minnesota logging companies.

Founded under a different name by Kevin's father Alan Knaeble and two partners, the company has grown from humble roots to one of the most well-respected logging companies in the state. Alan bought out his partners in the early '80s and changed the company name to Knaeble Timber when he took Kevin on as partner in the early '90s. Kevin and Khris took over the reins of the company in 1998. Though retired, Alan still enjoys working part-time for the company.

"We have a long history in the logging business," Kevin explained. "My grandfather and great-grandfather were loggers back in the '30s and '40s. Dad decided to get into the

business in the early '70s. I worked for him doing just about every job there is in the logging industry. I started out running a power saw, cutting limbs off trees. I've driven dump trucks and every piece of machinery there is. I can't think of doing anything else. Logging is such a great industry.

"I think within the logging industry as a whole, we have a very good reputation. We maintain a good operation right down the line. I'd hope we're in the top five in the state as far as being good loggers. If someone went to a state or county office and asked for a reference on Knaeble Timber, I'd hope that our company would be near number one in the industry. I think it probably would be."

Large coverage area

The company is based in Northome, Minn., with satellite sites around the Big Falls area. The satellite sites serve as holding areas for logs that mills aren't immediately ready to take. The company covers a large part of northeast Minnesota, as far south as the Mille Lacs area to International Falls on the Canadian border. "We don't go out of state, but we cover a large portion of Minnesota," Khris noted. "We'll go just about wherever the mills want us to go cut wood. It's a good-size area."

Kevin handles day-to-day operations, including running machinery. Khris is the company's office manager, handling paperwork, payroll, taxes and a variety of other duties. Together, the couple has increased the company's business since taking over.

"We've more than doubled in size since 1998," Kevin remarked. "In this business, that can be hard to do, but we decided we needed to. So we bought quite a few trucks and some new pieces of equipment and started growing. It's really helped us increase our production. The mills like



Khris Knaeble,
co-owner

Operator Ron Hill uses a Komatsu PC220LC-7 excavator with a Lim-mit LM2100 delimber attachment to remove limbs from cut trees. "They're topnotch machines," Knaeble Timber co-owner Kevin Knaeble said of the Komatsu excavators. "We especially like the smoothness in the hydraulics and the fuel efficiency."



it because we're able to deliver what they need. We can even deliver in the months when logging is sparse because we store product at our satellite facilities. That way, the mills always have a fresh supply of logs. That's important to them, so it's important to us."

Knaeble Timber gets its products for the mills from several sites it logs at any one time. According to Kevin, the company has five to six active sites at any one time where it gets timber. The sites range in size from a few acres to several hundred acres.

"Our volume depends on several factors, especially weather," Kevin explained. "We like to think we can hit it really hard from around the first of December to early spring if the ground freezes up and the snow stays around, but it's also dictated by our customers' needs."

Employees make a difference

Staying around is something Knaeble Timber knows. With more than three decades in business, the company began with a small number of employees, but quickly grew to more than 30 in the '70s. Technology has lowered the number of workers needed, so today the company employs about 20 people. There are also several subcontractors who work exclusively for Knaeble Timber. The company works 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the winter months, when the logging season is at its peak.

Knaeble Timber runs two crews, which move around to various logging sites doing whatever is necessary to get logs to area mills. Many of the employees have been with the company for several years. "It's really a family operation," Khris commented. "We don't say that just because we run it. We believe the people who work here are more like family than employees. We've got guys that have been here almost as long as the business has been in existence."

"Most of our employees grew up in the industry, so they understand what it takes to be profitable," Kevin added. "They work very hard at it. They understand the business and they understand machinery. They can do almost any work that needs to be done on the machinery. That's a big plus. When you have that kind of dedication, people recognize your company as a good one. Our employees really help our company shine."



A Knaeble Timber operator uses a Timbco 425EXL feller buncher to fell trees on a project in Koochiching County. The machine features a cab-leveling system that allows easy operation on steep slopes and flat ground.

When logging slows down, many of Knaeble's employees remain with the company to help in its road building operation. The company focuses on building township roads, forestry roads, doing the dirt work and placing the subbase ahead of the pavers. Beginning this summer, the company will also supply concrete through a new ready-mix plant at Northome.

"One of the hardest things about logging is that when it slows down a lot of guys leave, so it's hard to keep a crew together," Kevin observed. "Road building has allowed us to keep those employees around by filling a void during the off-season. We still do some logging in the summer too, but with the road building we can keep our guys around. That's important to us. We dabbled in road building before, but really got heavy into it about the time Khris and I took over the business."

Key employees include woods foreman Jason Newberg, trucking foreman Jeff Peterson, construction foreman Charlie Nelson and ready-mix manager Cory Pink.

"Really, all of our employees are key," affirmed Khris. "Without them we wouldn't be in business."

Good equipment is important

Knaeble Timber also relies on good equipment to increase productivity at its logging and road building jobs. Included in its inventory are two Komatsu excavators (a PC220LC-7 and a PC200LC-6) purchased from Road Machinery & Supplies through sales representative Ryan Milette. The company also purchased a Lim-mit LM2100 delimeter and a Pro Pack PP453 delimeter through RMS.

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Knaeble Timber looks to continued growth in the future

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"We compared other brands before we bought the excavators, but we really like what Komatsu offers in terms of productivity," Kevin commented. "They're topnotch machines across the board. We especially like the smoothness in the hydraulics. The other big plus is fuel efficiency. The machines save us quite a bit on fuel in the long run, so that ups our profitability. Plus, Komatsu is an impressive company."

Longtime operator Ron Hill likes the new 53,500-pound PC220LC-7 for several reasons.

"It's an extremely reliable machine," Hill said. "It's easy to maintain and easy to change the oil. From an operator's standpoint, the cab is very comfortable, so it reduces fatigue. When you put everything together, it's a more productive machine."

The company also runs a Timbco 425EXL and a 425D feller buncher purchased from RMS. The 425EXL machine features a two-cylinder, four-way cab-leveling system that allows easy

operation on the steepest slopes as well as flat ground. It also offers efficient night operation and a 300-horsepower engine, making it a perfect fit for Knaeble Timber.

"Timbco has been around a long time," Kevin said. "It's the premier machine up in this area, and that's because of speed. It's fast and agile and that's important in the conditions we're in. We've got a long history with Timbco machines, too. Dad actually bought the first one in Minnesota back in the mid-'80s. We've never had anything different. They're powerful. That machine increases our productivity."

While Kevin and his employees handle routine maintenance on the machines, they turn to RMS' branch in Grand Rapids for issues they can't resolve themselves. Kevin is impressed with the service he's received from RMS and Milette.

"One of the biggest sales points with us is service, and Ryan and RMS have certainly delivered," Kevin claimed. "Any time we've needed something, they've been right there to make sure we have it. They either come out or we can take the machine to their shop in Grand Rapids. Either way, they've been great to work with."

Continued growth

With good employees and reliable equipment, Knaeble Timber has grown steadily during its nearly 35-year history. The company has ventured into new areas and continues to try different things. Kevin and Khrist don't see that changing anytime soon.

"I think we'll put another complete crew on in the next couple of years," Kevin predicted. "We've been a two-crew operation for a long time now, but it's time we grew. I can see us doing 60,000 cords next year and I don't see that number going down in the future. The demand for logs is there, so we have to be willing to meet it."

Continuing to meet the demand by consistently providing customers with outstanding service and timber is what has kept Knaeble Timber one of the most respected companies in the logging industry.

"We know that we have to continue to give our customers the best service available," Kevin concluded. "Knaeble Timber has done that for a long time, and we'll continue the tradition." ■

A Knaeble Timber operator uses a Komatsu PC200LC-6 with a Pro Pack delimeter to remove limbs from trees. Knaeble relies on Komatsu equipment from Road Machinery and Supplies for a variety of applications.



Kevin Knaeble (left) works with RMS sales representative Ryan Milette to meet his equipment needs.

