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The Job No One Wants: Why Won't young People Work in Logging?

On a steep slope just inland from Waldport, Oregon, a young forestry worker named Jared Foster is at the controls of a large machine called a forwarder. The machine, made by Finnish company Ponnse, looks like it was designed by Michael Bay.

The front section contains a climate-controlled cabin, in which Foster sits, listening to a country music station as he works. The back features a large, articulated mechanical arm with a yellow claw, and a cage that can hold up to 20 metric tons of felled timber. The whole thing is tethered by a steel cable to a large stump at the top of the slope, to keep it from careening down the hill.

In the cab, Foster manipulates a joystick that controls the arm, which gathers up felled Douglas Fir trees as if they were Jenga sticks. It's taken him a year to master it, and his training has included time on simulators. His supervisor, Matt Mattioda of Miller Lumber, says: "It's as complicated as flying a plane." Eventually, when there's an opening, Jared will get his chance to run the even more daunting harvester that can clear a patch of firs in minutes.

Mattioda and other experts hope the new machines might help the logging industry solve its millennial problem: young people are not attracted to a life in the forest.

He says that the machines are nothing short of a technological revolution for the industry. "A few years back we would have had to clear a slope like this by hand." Until now, mechanisation has only been possible on flat ground, because vehicles have not had the attractive capability to stay on sloped. Now, winches, tethering, and the wheel system mean that "together these machines can do the work of eight men or more".

John Garland, professor emeritus at Oregon State University, has spent a lifetime researching the industry and trying to improve its safety record. Earlier, as we drove along a forest road to the site that Miller Lumber was clearing, he explained why the industry has struggled to attract young people to its ranks. "Logging is difficult, dirty, dangerous, and declining."

Death or injury "can come from trees falling in the wrong direction, or hitting another tree and falling back on someone", he said. Others come from what are known as "struck-by" injuries, where a loose felled log hits somebody.

Garland talks of a recent Oregon death he investigated as a consultant, where a truck driver "was strapping on logs, and one fell off and struck him in the head".

"Oftentimes, we lose three or four timber fallers a year in Oregon, and the same in Washington."

If that's the most dangerous job in the industry, then there's a good argument for it being the most dangerous job in the country.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics issues an annual census of the deadliest jobs. In 2016, truck drivers had the most fatal workplace injuries (885), and loggers had 67. But loggers are a far smaller workforce. At 132.7 fatal injuries

per 100,000 workers, workers in logging are the most likely to die at work, and almost two and a half times more at risk than those in the next most dangerous profession, fishing.

The decline Garland mentions is not so much in what remains of the industry – indeed with construction booming, loggers are facing a labour shortage. "We went through a terrible recession in the 2008-2012 period. Since then it's been becoming markedly better."

Rather, it is in the communities that once fostered large workforces for the industry, but which suffered a series of blows from the 1980s from which few ever recovered.

"There was in the past a long familial relationship," says Garland. "As times got tough and the jobs got less plentiful, children became less inclined to follow in their parents' footsteps." In the cities where people have flooded to from all over the north-west, there's little appetite for a dangerous job with 4am starts all year round. And in an industry with no formal training, this means that skills – some necessary for survival – can only be taught on the job.

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