LOAD TRACKING SYSTEMS FOR WOODLAND OPERATIONS

Timber Security: trucking

INTRODUCTION: Any time wood products are loaded onto trailers and removed from a tract, someone has a financial interest in that shipment. The landowner, the logger, the timber buyer and others might need a full and fair accounting. They want to feel certain that everyone involved (truck drivers, woods crew, logger, buyer, and others) is honest and diligent. Good systems help to ensure good accountability.

Twenty years ago, most wood was hauled strictly on the “honor system.” Today, when valuable assets are routinely transferred (through thousands of repetitive transactions), a simple, inexpensive, and flexible paper-trail is highly recommended. Many good options have evolved over the years.

Load tracking systems are effectively employed in a wide variety of forms, but they share the same fundamental components. Consistently applied, load tracking systems can be good accounting tools and a good deterrent to theft. If they are applied inconsistently, with a lack of commitment and discipline, they are a waste of effort.

Every type of load tracking system relies on the logging crew to document its shipments. Detractors point out that no one will document a load of wood he plans to steal. True as that is, it does not diminish the value of load tracking systems. Many financial crimes are perpetrated by half-hearted, undecided criminals. Visible, disciplined internal controls can dissuade this group. Like the lock on your home or a gate on a tract, load tracking systems are imperfect but valuable nonetheless.

Fig. 1: Attach a unique, sequential numbered tag to each load, and record the number on the shipping record, to be associated with a scale ticket.

GENERAL FEATURES: Load tracking systems have two physical components. First: A serialized load tag. These can be printed and bound professionally, or a small landowner can create them from index cards. Second: A load report. Some systems use a multi-part trip ticket; others use a simple list.

More important than the physical components, the commitment of owners, buyers and logging contractors is essential. The requirement to maintain these records should be included in any stumpage sale contract or “cut-and-haul” contract. The forester and the logging crew must do their part if it is to be worthwhile.

OPERATION: Before a loaded trailer moves away from the loader, two functions must occur.

1) A written record that documents that particular load must be created. Date, loading time, species, product, trip ticket number and destination must be recorded. Other data (like driver’s name, loader operator or trailer number) are optional, but simple reports are best.

2) A Trip Ticket Number must be assigned and attached to the load. For visibility en route and for checking loads that are not shipped immediately, a serialized trip ticket should be attached to the load. A good alternate approach is to spray paint a portion of the trip ticket number onto the
load. Once the load is delivered to a mill, the driver should attach the trip ticket number to the scale ticket.

The forester (timber owner, timber buyer) must inspect load reports and trip tickets at the loading site; this is a critical component of the system. If the crew fails to document each load as it is created, no real security will exist. Records that are created at the end of the day and those that are transcribed will have no security value. When the crew fails to document loading time, the system will have very little security value. Each load must be tagged or marked in compliance with the owner’s policy. Feedback to the crew is critical.

Each week or twice a month, load reports (a record of shipments) must be reconciled with scale tickets or settlements (a record of receipts). Every entry on a load report (or multi-part trip ticket) must be associated with a record of receipts. Exceptions must be resolved.

**APPLICATION:** How does this kind of system represent an improvement or cost savings? Load tracking systems do not increase cash flow or profits for the owner, the buyer, or the logger. Neither does a safety program, BMP compliance, or paying taxes. The goal is to avoid expensive and painful trouble.

A timber sale (or harvest) is a very important transaction for any landowner. A logging contractor relies on being fully paid for the work and investment he’s made in a load of wood. The contrast between a logging operation with good shipping records and an operation with no shipping records is dramatic. Simple, inexpensive, and flexible load tracking systems are essential components of any harvesting operation.

**SPECIFICATIONS AND COSTS:** The physical components of load tracking systems (professionally printed load reports and trip tickets) should cost less than 2 cents per ton. In large organizations, the forester’s time and the reconciliation process will require an investment. Many managers have chosen to make these investments to enhance the quality of their internal controls.

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**Fig. 2:** Load reports: simple, no-carbon form allows landowner and logger to document date, loading time, species, product, load tag number, and destination for each load.

**Fig. 3:** Last four digits of trip ticket number sprayed on load.

**Fig. 4:** The forester’s inspection and feedback for the logging crew is an essential component of good load tracking systems.

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