

GYRO-TRAC NEWS

Alberta Contractor a Leader in Land Clearing: Bear Slashing a Big Believer in Benefits of Using Forestry Mulchers to Clear Vegetation

By Thomas G. Dolan
Date Posted: 6/1/2008

(Excerpts)

BONNYVILLE, Alberta — “Mulchers are the way of the future,” said Andre Dion, shop manager of Bear Slashing Ltd. in Bonnyville, Alberta. “They are the best way to preserve the environment.”

Bear Slashing was founded in 1988 by Andre’s older brother, Dany. The company moved to Bonnyville in 1997 to better serve clients and has since opened additional offices in Fort McMurray and Calgary. Now in its 20th year, the company operates in virtually every province in Canada.

The business began by supplying land-clearing services to the oil industry. It has expanded and diversified, and its services now include pipeline construction, subdivision development, land-clearing and logging.

Dany pioneered the use of forestry mulching equipment as the most environmentally beneficial way to clear land for rights-of-way, oil exploration and other projects, according to Andre.

“Our philosophy is to get the job done with the least impact on the environment,” said Andre. “This means saving trees where possible, logging the salvageable trees, and eliminating the need for expensive reclamation efforts.”

In the past, contractors cut the vegetation and-or burned it, Andre noted, but no longer. “We do not believe in burning our future,” said Andre.

Forestry mulchers grind trees and brushy vegetation into chips that decompose quickly and enrich the soil. There is less damage to the top layer of soil, which reduces erosion. There are no stumps, root balls, holes or brush piles to impede wildlife or create tinder as future fire

hazards. When a forestry mulcher makes one swath through the forest, it creates a passable trail that is usable for vehicles, equipment and people. This is for short-term, and then re-growth takes over.

Another leading supplier of heavy equipment to Bear Slashing is Gyro-Trac. In fact, Dany purchased the very first machine manufactured by Gyro-Trac. These were some of the first mulching machines that Bear Slashing owned, and they were used in wet areas. With the purchase of additional Gyro-Trac machines, he built and expanded Bear Slashing to become a leader in forestry and vegetation mulching. Today the company operates 13 Gyro-Trac mulchers, including models GT-13XP, GT-25XP and GT-60.

Bear Slashing is now the largest company of its type in Canada, according to Andre; it does more work and has more equipment.

“Using a mulcher that is unsuited to the terrain or ground conditions or is under-powered will end up costing you money due to breakdowns,” Andre said. “But just having the machines isn’t enough. We have service trucks fully equipped with inventory, spare parts and tools to keep the equipment operating at their peak.”

Having the right team of qualified, competent operators and mechanics is also an important dynamic. The company employs over 120 people in the winter, requiring a substantial investment in human resources. It supplies in-house training programs to develop personnel and maintains compliance with a petroleum industry safety program.

“We believe in listening to our employees to keep Bear Slashing in the number one position,” said Andre. “We want our employees to stay with us indefinitely.”

The catalyst for a strong environmental approach came from Europe, Andre said, although environmental concerns are rapidly catching up in North America. “Burning used to take place all of the time, but now it’s becoming more and more rare,” said Andre.

Being a pioneer isn’t easy. It was a hard sell at first. “There was definitely resistance at first, and price was an issue,” Andre said. “We had to prove it was more cost-effective to just get in and out and being done with it, as opposed to burning and then coming back later and going through all of the expense to reclaim the land.”

A key to winning acceptance of the new approach was convincing government forest protection officials that mulching was good for the environment. In a letter dated March 17, 2005, Barry Coleman, a wildfire ranger from the Forest Protection Division in Hinton, Alberta, wrote Bear Slashing of efforts along these lines. The previous four years the agency had been trying various strategies to reduce wildfire hazards, he wrote. "We have found that mulching machines provide a cost-effective, environmentally-friendly strategy for: breaking up the continuity of fuel, reducing ground and ladder fuels, and admixing woody debris with mineral soil. In the event of a wildfire we hope these disturbances on the landscape will provide FPD with opportunities to: reduce crown fire runs by providing a series of containment lines that fire operations can tie into, opening the canopy so that air tanker retardant drops can better penetrate to ground level, provide access for small water tenders and/or sprinkler systems, and provide a safer working environment for ground crews."

Barry commended Bear Slashing for four mulching contracts the company had recently completed. "As with anything of this nature FPD is on a steep learning curve, but with patience, understanding, and valuable suggestions of your equipment operators, slashers, and supervisor, we managed to achieve the results we were looking for in the timelines given."

The learning curve for most people introduced to this new concept has been largely completed. "Reaction from government, forestry, and environmentalists alike has been very positive," said Andre. "Mulching is now recognized as an important technique to reduce industry's footprint while allowing operations to continue."

Bear Slashing supports trade associations and communities where the company works. "We always step up to the plate to help sponsor association functions, seminars, and events," Andre said.

Bear Slashing also supports the goals of the Canadian Association of Geophysical Contractors and the Canadian Society of Exploration Geophysicists. One way this has been accomplished is through the incorporation of GPS systems on its mulchers. For seismic surveying, good trees do not have to be felled; they can be left standing when the surveyors first go into an area.

Here is a roundup of the basic services provided by Bear Slashing:

- Mulching LIS (low impact seismic) lines for 2D and 3D geophysical surveys
- Hand felling trees for seismic lines, slashing & clean-up
- Well lease construction
- Core hole and drilling site preparation
- Facility and plant site construction
- Pipeline right-of-way construction, maintenance
- Timber salvage, logging and hauling
- Clean-up, reclamation
- Golf course construction and clean-up of deadfall
- Clearing brush and trees for ski hills
- Mulching to remove stumps and debris
- Construction of cross-country ski trails
- Construction of recreational snowmobile and ATV trails

“All this is done with no burning, no debris, no barriers, and no erosion,” said Andre, in summing up. “Mulching is economical and beneficial to the environment.”