

Timesharing a portable sawmill is a clever idea for American co-op

A cooperative is an ownership structure in which several individuals share the risk and profits of the operation. A sawmill cooperative with likeminded people is a popular option to spread both the initial cost and workload of milling. Some members such as farmers only saw periodically, so sharing a sawmill can be very practical in some cases.

The Northwood Forestry Cooperative (NFC) in the US state of Minnesota is a prime example of the successful application of this system. Both Patrick Lanin and Glenn Elvecrog are members of this Co-op. Patrick was president of the Co-op for nearly 10 years. "I'm now 82 years old and have sawn more lumber than anyone else in the cooperative, about 6,000 board feet. I own 145 acres of mixed woodland in the town of Brainerd and live in a house that I've built myself. There's a wide variety of tree species growing on my property: white pine, red pine, larch, quaking aspen, big-tooth aspen, red oak, white oak, sugar maple, red maple, black spruce, white spruce and my favorite black ash. I've now got a lot of stacked, dried, grade-sawn lumber on site. With the current outrageous prices for lumber, all of a sudden people are calling me, looking to get a good deal!"



Glenn is a tree farmer and maple syrup producer in Aitkin County who owns 160 acres of forest. He's 68 years old and the current president of the Co-op. He muses: "Our cooperative was set up in 2001. The idea to form a cooperative was formed in the late 90s. Our friend Ed Slettom knew all about dairy farm cooperatives and suggested we start a co-op too."

"The Co-op allows its members to saw as much as they please on a part-time basis without having to put out the money needed for a mill"

The first president of NFC and one of the founders, Gary Bradford, documented some common goals, which are based on the mission of the Cooperative: "to promote sound woodland management and to assist members in wood products marketing". The philosophy of the organisation is that members help each other out, with a focus on the following three areas:

- Improving the quality of woodlots
- Presenting educational workshops offering members new skills and forestry information
- Helping members to profit from their woodlots

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Glenn explains some of the activities of the Cooperative: “The NFC holds an annual members’ breakfast meeting and education program in April and an annual membership meeting and elections in June. In September we host a Field day which is open to the general public, where we demonstrate the ATS mill and other forestry equipment and have a forestry professional discuss a specific topic or project.



All NFC members can request a “COOP day”, where we go to a member’s property and assist with their project. In the past we have assisted members with trail construction, tree planting, building projects, timber stand improvement and brushing.”

Glenn is the current custodian of their Peterson ATS portable sawmill. He explains how they learned about swingblades: “We saw a demonstration of a Lucas Mill and decided we needed a mobile timber mill. We were looking at getting a mill in the price range of US\$ 10k-13k, so each member would have to chip in around \$ 1,200. One of our members, a qualified engineer, looked at the mechanical engineering of both the Lucas Mill and the Peterson, and concluded that the Peterson is simply much better made than the Lucas. From within the NFC membership Gary got together 10 individuals who were interested in investing in a sawmill and organised them as Northwoods Forestry Enterprises Incorporated (NFEI).”

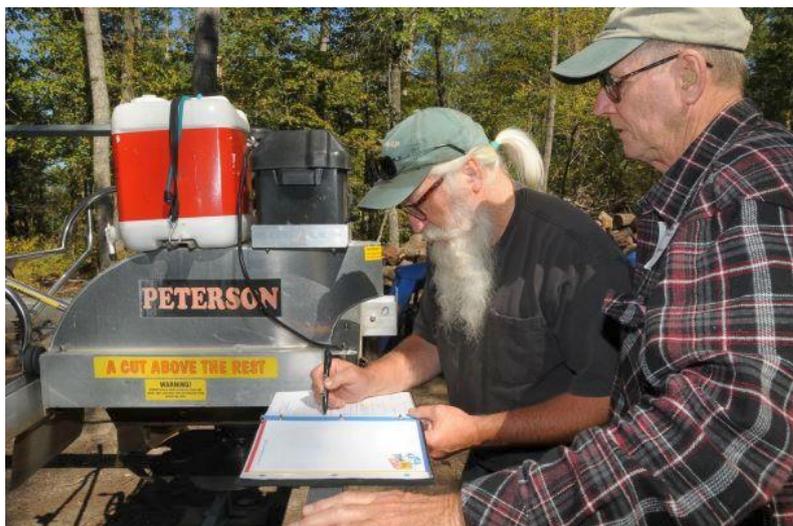
“The Peterson is simply much better made than the Lucas”

The group had no interest in getting a bandsaw mill. Glenn explains: “We wanted to make quality dimensional lumber such as 1-to-1.5-inch boards that were straight and accurate enough to use or sell without any further processing. A big advantage of the Peterson is that it’s great for quarter sawing lumber, which equates to about 60% of our output.

The ATS mill was in the right price range and has the portability to be moved from owner to owner and can be set up easily. We mill all kinds of soft and hard woods, especially Red Oak and Aspen are excellent for producing dimensional lumber. We have built many things with lumber sourced with the Peterson: that includes flooring, cabinets and paneling for houses, cabins, greenhouses, a barn, a superstructure for a tractor shed and we are planning to build a solar-powered kiln.”

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The Cooperative allows its members to use the mill for a scheduled amount of time. They charge the owner/operator a flat fee of \$ 12 per hour for use based on the mill's hour meter, to cover future maintenance and repairs that the mill or trailer may need. A custodian maintains the mill and runs the time sharing schedule. Each operator fills out a milling report that contains the hours used and any issues or concerns they have noticed. This information is collected by the custodian and the mill is inspected before it is transferred to another operator.



Anyone can become a member of the Co-op. The Cooperative currently has about 40 members, out of which five are shared owners of the sawmill, reduced from the original ten. This seems to be the optimum number of people to share the mill for this group, as it allows for flexibility of access during the 6-month sawing season. Though it can be used, the mill is generally stored during the winter months in Minnesota.

“There’s a great deal of respect for the mill, working it feels like a sacred experience”



Patrick loves the way the system works: “The Co-op allows its members to saw as much please on a part-time basis without having to put out the money needed for a mill. The Peterson is amazingly portable and requires minimal maintenance.”



MILLER FEATURE

We asked Glenn and Patrick for some useful milling tips:

- If possible clean your logs and/or power wash the bark before milling, use a metal detector and inspect for foreign objects
- Take your time in positioning a new log. We use a small bottle jack to level the log and wooden wedges to hold in place
- Starting with the top level provides us with better quality boards
- If milling for construction, have a list of the lumber sizes you need
- Have an idea of what you want from a log when you start but be flexible as the ATS can saw out defects and improve your board quality
- Keep your blade sharp
- Always go over the checklist in the Peterson manual, so that you can catch problems early on

The Cooperative is looking well after their Peterson sawmill. Glenn: “In 2008 we bought an enclosed, weather-proof trailer for storage and transport of the mill. A standard pickup or SUV can pull the trailer to an owner/operator’s site. We generally help each other setup and take down the mill but it can be done by one person if necessary. Once the mill is setup on site, the owner/operator is responsible for the sawing and processing of the lumber he/she is cutting. There’s a great deal of respect for the mill, working it feels like a sacred experience.”



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