

# This Is Not Logging!

*Woodland Restoration brings an aggressive attitude to forest restoration*

*By Roy Anderson*



Talk to Matt Arno about his business, Woodland Restoration Inc., and early in the conversation you're likely to hear him say, "This is not logging!" That's because Arno and his business partner Robert "Bert" Nilson have spent the last thirteen years building a forest restoration business.

## **Landscaping Versus Logging**

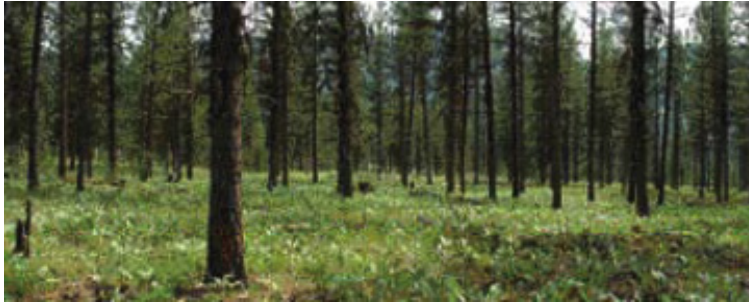
Arno and Nilson define forest restoration as a blend of aesthetic and silvicultural forest management considerations, which results in the transformation of overstocked forests into healthier forests stocked with large, well-spaced, fire-resistant trees. Their restoration ethic means that selecting trees for harvest is dictated by the desired result 'on-the-ground' rather than a tree's economic value. That, in turn, means that most trees harvested have marginal commercial value and that's why Arno prefers to describe Woodland Restoration's business as large-scale landscaping rather than logging.

Arno and Nilson say aesthetic considerations play an important role in their business, because nearly all clients are private landowners whose main objective is to have a healthy, visually pleasing forest, rather than harvesting trees with the objective of maximizing revenue.

## **The Mechanics of Restoration**

In addition to leaving the biggest and best trees standing, leaving those stand- ing trees in good condition is another major consideration in the way Arno and Nilson work. That's why they use a cut-to-length harvester and forwarder combination, which allows them to move harvested trees from the woods to the landing without damaging the leave trees. Their equipment includes a Valmet 500T harvester equipped with a 960 processing head and a Valmet 840 forwarder, which produces, on average, two truckloads a day.

Both machines have seen better days, but Arno and Nilson say that not having the pressure to make payments on a new machine aligns perfectly with their restoration philosophy, and gives them options other harvesters may not have. Nilson, who operates the harvester says, "If working on a certain day means we'll damage the soil, we just shut down until its dry enough."



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### **Expensive Proposition**

Arno and Nilson have learned the hard way that forest restoration work is a lot more expensive than commercial logging. As a result, they've developed several different methods for charging out Woodland Restoration's services. Arno says if a project will remove enough commercially valuable trees, then they charge for their work on a per ton basis. Projects with fewer commercially valuable trees are charged either by-the-hour or by-the-acre.

For some of the by-the-hour or by-the-acre type jobs, Woodland Restoration uses a third piece of equipment — a farm tractor with a chipper attached to the PTO and also equipped with a small loader. The tractor moves through the harvest unit and the loader feeds felled, non-merchantable trees into the chipper. On some jobs, the chipper is removed and the tractor and loader are used to pile slash for burning. Arno says that many land owners want a clean looking forest to meet their visual needs, and treating the slash is important in the Inland West where decomposition is slow and fire hazard is high.

According to Arno, other loggers in western Montana are also beginning to accept the reality of how expensive it is to do a restoration project. Arno says, "Up until recently, most everybody was putting low bids on restoration-type work because they always assume there's going to be enough commercially valuable logs to pay for the logging cost." From Arno's perspective, "The bottom line is that to do restoration work right, there's usually not enough logs."



### **The Value of a Good Reputation**

Although it has taken years of hard work, Woodland Restoration has developed a solid reputation in western Montana. Nearly all of their work comes from word-of-mouth referrals. For example, more than a few jobs have come through connections to the Missoula, Mont. based Five Valleys Land Trust. Five Valleys' mission is to protect and preserve Montana's natural legacy, and to do that they often use conservation easements. A conservation easement is a binding agreement between a landowner and the Land Trust, which limits land uses such as subdivision and development, but in many cases allows for forest management.

Peter Stark, a Missoula-based writer and self-confessed tree hugger, is another of Woodland Restoration's former clients. Several years ago, Stark learned, through a Montana State University Extension Service forest stewardship course, that 50 acres of his forest contained an average of 837 trees per acre and that all were about 100 years old with microscopic width growth rings. Realizing his forest needed help, Stark hired Woodland Restoration. Stark's forest, situated right next to the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area trailhead, is a jumping off point for hoards of environmentally sensitive types, so he was concerned about protests.

To Stark's surprise, instead of protests, the local chapter of the Sierra Club hosted a press event promoting Woodland Restoration's work as an example of hazardous fuel reduction work done right.

### **New Markets**

When Stark learned that Woodland Restoration would be selling many of the harvested trees to the paper mill, he felt there must be some higher and better use. After a lot of legwork, Stark found someone to mill one truckload of his property's Western larch logs into flooring. He used the flooring in a dance studio that his wife, a dance professor at the University of Montana, was building.

The dance floor was a hit with several of Stark's architect friends, and Arno and Stark decided that maybe they had stumbled on to a viable business idea — tight grained larch flooring produced from Woodland Restoration's projects. Woodland Restoration and Stark formed a partnership and North Slope Sustainable Wood ([www.northslopewood.com](http://www.northslopewood.com)) was born.

Although the flooring business is competitive, Arno is optimistic about Northslope's future, because he believes there's a customer segment that values forest products produced from sustainable, restoration projects. He may be right. Which would mean that the title of a future article about Woodland Restoration, Inc. might be, "This is not flooring!"