
LOGGER CERTIFICATION AND ITS IMPACT ON PROFESSIONALISM IN THE WOODS

OPINION BY TED WRIGHT

Whether you're new to the industry or have decades of experience, you've probably heard of various logger certification and training programs, including the Master Logger Certification Program® (Master Logger).* If you're not certified already, you might be wondering: Is getting a Master Logger certification worth it?

The logging industry of today demands increasing levels of professionalism and forest stewardship to meet the rising expectations of landowners and consumers. While training programs play a role, a third-party certification program can verify performance where it matters – in the woods.

Two decades ago, a group of loggers – the Professional Logging Contractors of Maine (PLC) – developed the Master Logger Certification Program to provide verification of timber harvesting companies' practices on the ground.

The program expanded to seven northeast states from Maine to New York, and in 2003, the Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestlands (TCNEF) was created to administer the program with the broader goal of “enhancing the health of working forest ecosystems through exceptional accountability” throughout the Northern Forest region, which includes all the states of New England and New York. More than twenty years after its



creation, Master Logger remains the only “in the woods” third-party certification program for logging companies, developed “by loggers, for loggers.”

Today there are more than 120 Master Logger certified companies in the region.

What does this really mean when it comes to raising professional standards in logging? A look at the requirements for certification and how the program verifies they are being met demonstrates the value of Master Logger.

The program’s primary goal is to keep a thriving and sustainable forest products industry in place throughout New England. To do this, Master Logger established nine goals with forest ecosystem sustainability, worker safety, and forest economy sustainability in mind. These nine goals guide Master Loggers in their work.

Field verifiers visit actual harvest sites to determine whether candidates for Master Logger Certification are meeting or exceeding the standards required for certification. Their findings are submitted to an independent, regional board that makes the final decision on whether a company will be certified.

Once certified, Master Loggers are subject to regular



recertification audits to ensure performance continues to meet the standard. The Master Logger program is audited yearly by the global certifying body Preferred by Nature, which randomly selects companies for field audits and reviews group documents. These audits identify strengths and areas for improvement and are used to continuously improve the program.

Today, the Master Logger program continues to expand its numbers, with certified companies growing in states including New York and Vermont thanks to recognition of the program’s value. Outreach efforts in the region have included a popular series of regional water protection workshops offered by Master Logger in 2021 and 2022, where several hundred employees of Master Logger companies have been able to participate to further their education and awareness.

The benefits of certification continue to grow as well. Master Loggers in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont can now achieve reduced workers’ compensation insurance costs, and efforts are underway to increase the number of states where this benefit exists.

This year, Master Logger was also recognized by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI). Mills and landowners can recognize any Master Logger certified company as a “Certified Logging Company,” which meets the SFI fiber sourcing and forest management standard requirements.

TCNEF also administers a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified group Chain of Custody that provides an information trail, established and audited according to rules set by FSC, for Master Loggers and wood products companies to ensure that wood comes from certified forests. Master Loggers can carry FSC Chain of Custody for their wood sales, and in 2023, FSC recognition of Master Logger will expand even further when Master Loggers can provide FSC certification as a benefit to small landowners in the region. More information regarding this change will be available later in 2022.

In the early days, awareness of the program was slow to gain traction, but over time Master Loggers report recognition has



Above: Ron Ridley, at left, and son Corey Ridley of L&A Ridley Logging Inc., a Master Logger company in Jay, Maine. Left: Master Logger GCA Logging Inc. forwarder at work in the woods north of Oquossoc, Maine in September 2022.

Nine Goals of the Master Logger Certification Program

Under each of these goals there are comprehensive harvest responsibilities with explicit performance standards. Visit masterloggercertification.com for more details.

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| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Document Harvest Planning | Protect Water Quality | Maintain Soil Productivity | Sustain Forest Ecosystems | Manage Forest Aesthetics | Ensure Workplace Safety | Demonstrate Continuous Improvement | Ensure Business Viability | Uphold Certificate Integrity |

grown and today many loggers, landowners, wood consumers, and environmentalists are aware of it and see a variety of benefits to certification.

For some loggers, the initial monetary cost of the program might potentially give them pause, but for many, it's well worth the investment. When Robert T. Thurbur Jr. of Jerimoth Forestry in Rhode Island first heard about the program over 10 years ago, he figured that he was already upholding the high standards and best practices of sustainable logging and decided the cost of certification would be better spent on other areas of his business. Some years down the road, however, after being recognized by his peers as an exceptional logger in the Northeast, he decided that certification would help keep him accountable and sharp. He also figured that, since he had never spent any money on advertising, he could consider the cost of the Master Logger certification as essentially part of his advertising budget.

"When I'm doing my sales pitch to a potential customer, I don't need to explain how good I am: I can point to my Master Logger certification and it speaks for itself," Thurbur says. "I've also found that, over time, having the certification has helped boost my reputation and it's opened up markets that were not previously available to me. It's gotten my name in circulation, and people recognize me as a reliable and trustworthy supplier."

"We do quality work, we do things with integrity, we do things properly, and we practice sustainability in our harvests," says Master Logger Cody Johnson of Johnson Forestry & Timber Harvesting in New York. "Some of the mills have been recognizing certification since we've had it and there are financial incentives to be part of the program."

Master Logger Heath Bunnell of HB Logging in New Hampshire says that by being involved in the Master Logger program, he pays less for his insurance on the job. "It's definitely been a big savings for me. I encourage other loggers to get certified. If you're a Master Logger you're definitely doing what you are supposed to be doing out here, so when things are tight, we're able to get work and we're able to move our wood."

Not only does the certification save money on workers' compensation insurance in some states, but the Master Logger workplace safety component also provides invaluable training that helps prevent workers from being hurt or fatally injured in the first place. Master Logger Sam Lincoln, owner of Lincoln Farm Timber Harvesting, says that "Being a safety-certified employer, the savings on insurance is a great benefit, but my highest priority is keeping workers safe. This kind of training is indispensable for keeping everyone healthy, safe, and out of the emergency room."

Many loggers can attest that the Master Logger program has



A Master Logger Best Management Practice (BMP) training underway.

given them the tools to do great work in the woods safely and create a sustainable, healthy forest.

A 2018 research report, "Value Assessment of Certified Master Logger Programs," prepared for the Wood Supply Research Institute, found nearly 60 percent of small landowners had a preference for using certified Master Loggers in a harvest, and the visibility of the program has only grown since then.

As demand for wood harvested professionally, sustainably, and safely grows, the merits of Master Logger Certified companies will continue to expand. There has never been a better time to become a Master Logger, or to seek one for a harvest.

Ted Wright is the executive director of Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestlands. For information on the Master Logger Program, contact Ted Wright at (207) 532-8721 or executivedirector@tcnef.org. Information is also available at masterloggercertification.com.

* The Master Logger Certification Program® name and logo were trademarked in 2020 and belong exclusively to the Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestlands.