

WESTAS

Westas Group's stakeholder magazine 2/2023

MAIJA PERÄVAINIO, THE NEW FORESTRY DIRECTOR OF WESTAS

THE FINEST INDUSTRY IN THE WORLD

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EXPORT SALES MANAGER JUHA NUMMINEN

GLOBAL SAWN TIMBER MARKET IN THE DOLDRUMS

PAGE 16

WESTAS PUBLISHED ITS FIRST-EVER
SUSTAINABILITY REPORT THIS YEAR

SUSTAINABILITY REPORT GUIDES AND MEASURES OPERATIONS

PAGE 10



WESTAS

Westas is Westas Group's magazine for forest owners, customers and other stakeholder groups. It is published twice a year.

Westas Group produces high-quality spruce and pine sawn timber for the domestic market and for global export markets. The Group is one of Finland's largest private wood-processing companies. Its current mills are located in Koski and in Pori.



Westas group's stakeholder magazine

No. 2/2023
 Publisher Westas Group
 Myllykyläntie 42, 31500 Koski TL
 FINLAND
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 Raunion saha, Koski TL
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 Layout Mainostoimisto 4D
 Photography Jussi Vierimaa
 Printing house Newprint Oy
 Press run 9 890 pcs, Westas Group's
 customer and stakeholder register

Carbon neutral
 Print product
 ClimatePartner.com/16132-2310-1004



4041 1018
 Painotuote

EDITORIAL

SUSTAINABLE OPERATIONS ACROSS THE BOARD



Photo: Pasi Leino

Sustainable operations have always been an important value for us. Our aim has been to show respect towards our personnel, customers and partners alike.

Taking good care of environmental issues is closely linked to our operations, whether to our industrial activities or wood procurement in Finnish forests. However, we have not previously had policies written up or measurable indicators relating to sustainability. Companies of Westas's size are required to report on sustainability issues starting in 2025, but we decided to start to determine, report on and measure the sustainability of our operations well in advance. We have reviewed the processes linked to our operations in terms of environmental issues, emissions from our operations, HR or other aspects of organising proper governance. The moment for doing this was right, as economic activity is slowing down and we need

to assess our operations in more detail in terms of both our own activities and raw material and energy efficiency. At the same time, we have tried to forecast the development of our business in the coming years.

In spite of all the global turbulence, we look forward to the future with confidence but of course with due seriousness. Our financial situation is solid, enabling us to make planned development investments. Raw material availability is unlikely to increase, so we need to invest in efficiency and quality instead of aiming at a major production increase. The core idea is to produce high-quality sawn timber efficiently with a focus on customer service. For forest owners, we promise broader services in addition to good timber deals. ✕

PEKKA KOPRA

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are familiar with an issue that
you can understand it."*

— Maija Perävainio

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"As an industry insider, it is difficult to understand why some people think we are negligently exploiting forests."

— Maija Perävainio

Maija and the family dogs Lotta and Voitto.

THE FINEST INDUSTRY IN THE WORLD

***Maija Perävainio**, Westas's Forestry Director as of summer 2023, is a versatile forest industry expert who has seen how wood is processed into end products from a variety of angles. Right now, she feels she is in a place where she is able to make full use of her extensive experience.*

Perävainio graduated in forest economics from the University of Helsinki in the mid-1990s, majoring in wood and forest technology. After working at the university for a while, she landed a job at the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners in Helsinki, but her heart was calling her back to her home region of Satakunta. In 2003, Perävainio transferred to Mittaportti Oy in Rauma to work as development manager and onward to Metsä Group's Metsä Forest business area, where she was in charge of pulpwood reception for Metsä Group's pulpwood-using plants. Perävainio was also involved in the investment projects of the eight plants that she was in charge of. She worked in the areas of both wood procurement and production and also got to know the chip flows of sawmills.

Perävainio's diverse competence led her to a situation where she had to make a choice: forest or production. She got a job in a major greenfield sawmill construction project that was just starting up in Rauma, and went on to become a Mill Manager.

– I attended the day-care centre of the forest industry group Rauma-Repola, and at home I could hear the steady rumbling of the debarking plant, and my grandparents had a sawmill just across the field, so I don't think there was really much of a choice, Westas's new Forestry Director says with a smile.

THREE OCCUPATIONAL CORNERSTONES

Once the sawmill was completed, Perävainio made her next move. She describes the vacancy of the forestry director's role at Westas as a once in a lifetime opportunity. The seasoned professional, who had been working with the raw material as well as production and its side streams, saw it as a new and inspiring opportunity.

– In a company of this size, it is possible to see the big picture, and I can put my forest-related competence and my sawing competence to full use.

While Westas's activities are already highly customer-oriented, the forest director wants to integrate customer-oriented dialogue even more strongly into raw material procurement.

– I believe that a seamless understanding of the co-ordination between the raw material and end product will increase our efficiency and service capabilities.

Perävainio appreciates Westas's local focus and Finnish roots and praises the organisation's agile approach. The flat chain of command allows for efficient dialogue and decisions but also serves customers' needs. Combining agility with stability, which is highly appreciated by stakeholders and contractors, is also essential.

– In addition to guaranteeing profitability and the needed raw material flows, there is another important aspect to the forest director's job: attending to the employees' and contractors' work satisfaction and ensuring their well-being at work.

A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

Perävainio considers, for example, strengthening Westas's forest management services, ensuring employee competence and motivation, and further developing the company's strong wood procurement activities as future focus points.

– The forestry department has recently had its organisation revamped into what I believe is a well-functioning model. We have a lot of competence, diverse experience and amazing professionals, which makes the teamwork really bear fruit. The team members are sparring partners for each other, but I also hope that the teams increase a sense of togetherness and employee satisfaction.

In order to keep up the skills of its forest professionals, Westas recently organised a training day to help them prepare for the nature care certificate course. For most of the participants, of course, the day served as refresher training. Since biodiversity discussions are increasingly present in the forestry department's daily work, the day was also spent getting acquainted with the biodiversity roadmap of the Finnish Forest Industries Federation and the Finnish Sawmills Association.

– I consider it important for valuable biotopes to be identified and to know how to tell forest owners about the different options in relation to them.

MORE UNDERSTANDING, LESS CONFRONTATION

Looking to the future, Perävainio expects increasing storm and insect damage and other extreme events to pose a threat to the health of Finnish forests. We must also be alert when it comes to EU regulation: Finland's long history and success in forest management should be seen as a strength, not a weakness. In Perävainio's view, it is the forest professionals' job to demonstrate and ensure, through their own actions, that nature care and the commercial use of forests are not in conflict.

– As an industry insider, it is difficult to understand why some people think we are negligently exploiting forests. I am sure that forest industry people love forests and care about their health maybe more than any other group.

Indeed, she calls for less confrontation and encourages looking at things from different angles.

– It is only when you know and are familiar with an issue that you can understand it. A good example of this is the common perception of the industry. There is no greener industry than the sawmilling industry. We have a high-quality renewable raw material, we use it efficiently, and our products bind carbon. We need industry-wide efforts and marketing to make it clear that this is the coolest industry in the world and to attract young employees.

In her leisure time, you can find the eternal scout – perhaps unsurprisingly – in the forest. Besides being into caring for forests, the entire family share hunting as a hobby, down to the children and dogs. Perävainio got her hunting permit in her twenties, and now the youngest member of the family, her 12-year-old daughter, also takes part in moose hunting. Perävainio also confesses to having a “berry and mushroom problem”.

– It is ridiculous sometimes – I can't seem to leave the forest because I keep seeing just one more patch of berries or mushrooms that must be picked! On more than one occasion, I have found myself sitting in the car after a day of hunting with my mood full of funnel chanterelles, she says and laughs. ✕

THE FOREST AS A SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

The Finnish saying “What you learn as a child you will still master as an old person” is especially true of Ville Sirkka. Over the years, the skills he learned as a child from his father have been honed into a personal forest philosophy.

The Sirkka farm, established in the 1500s, is one of the oldest in Hämeenkyrö. The current family took over the farm more than three centuries ago, and in 1999, 19-year-old **Ville Sirkka** became the latest to take hold of the reins.

— The generational handover took place finally in 2002. At the time, we still had cattle, and my first job was to expand the cowshed. The cows left just under ten years ago, and nowadays the farm’s operations are built around farming the land and machinery contracting. I also cut down trees in the yard, he says.

The farm’s cultivation operations encompass some 50 hectares of organic oats and green manure. The farm also includes 65 hectares of lush spruce-dominated forest, in addition to which Sirkka has a forest partnership with a friend. He mainly handles any forest management work himself.

— Of course, I know that a forest owner’s best hourly wages are earned with a brush cutter, but I still get the most enjoyment out of cutting energy wood with a chainsaw. Firewood was routinely cut back when the water used by cowsheds was heated with wood.

The farmer describes himself as a man of the forest who enjoys the peacefulness of nature in many ways.

– I used to spend time in the forest with my father, but now the dog accompanies me. But there isn't much difference: neither of them listens to reason, and they both always have to be ushered away from a falling tree, he says with a smirk.

While Sirkka spends a good deal of time in the forest alone, he is also often accompanied by his forestry partner.

– The good thing about going out with a friend is that if we have agreed to go, even the weather won't stop us. If nothing else, at least we will grill some sausages.

PRACTICE MAKES A MASTER

At the age of 12, Sirkka took a brush cutting course in Mustiala, after which the farm acquired its first brush cutter and the necessary protective gear. He says that doing forest management work with his father ignited a spark that never faded.

– My father always let me do things and experiment, even though it would have been a lot faster if he had done it himself. Sometimes I learned the hard way, but at some point I started to be useful too. Now I have been trying to spark the same passion for forestry in my daughter.

Sirkka's basic principles of forest management are the same as those of his father, though he describes himself as a more broad-minded, diversity-loving forest owner.

– My dad always kept his forests in tip-top shape, constantly cleaning them up. In my opinion, a forest doesn't need to be like a park.

Sirkka's philosophy is that the forest should provide maximum happiness, not maximum returns. Some of his forests have been left completely outside of commercial use. He says that when he is in the forest on foot, bike or cross-country skis, he takes in the surroundings and enjoys the landscape values.

FOREST OWNERS NEED A SPARRING PARTNER

The farm's forests are located in the Pirkanmaa region, where a relatively high amount of butt rot can be observed. Wood is not traded on the basis of investment needs, but rather forests are harvested when it is necessary for the forest – usually every year. Sirkka is concerned about the negative reputation surrounding clear-cutting, although he admits that at one time it did influence his own decisions.

– At first, I cautiously felled only small areas here and there, but since then the size of the clearings has grown. I wish that clear-cutting would not be demonised. These forest areas are always regenerated after fellings!

The most recent timber trade took place at the start of August, which also coincided with the purchase of a new forest stand.

– A harvester was due to arrive at the neighbour's place, and I previously noted that Ville also had a stand that was ripe for harvesting. So we worked out a deal concerning the stand, recounts Westas's forestry specialist **Mikko Vajavaara**.

Sirkka nods in agreement and states that he appreciates Vajavaara's initiative when it comes to timber trade and that he also freely gives his opinion.

– Even though I give these matters a lot of consideration, it's always good to hear someone else's opinion. It is also important for the parties to click and the conversation to flow. Of course, Westas is not only a good buyer but can also offer attractive bucking, Sirkka sums up.

AT THE TABLE

COOLEST JOB IN THE WORLD



Having joined Westas's Forestry Department as recently as in April 2023, Mikko Vajavaara may be a green employee at the company, but he has a long-standing career as a forestry specialist. After graduating as a forestry engineer, Mikko gained work experience in forest planning, forest estate appraising and timber trade.

Over the years, he has accumulated especially solid competence and insight into how forests grow and evolve.

– That is why I take quite an active role and bring my competence to the forefront in my work as a forestry specialist and wood buyer.

Summers spent on his grandparents' farm convinced young Mikko that the forest and timber felling are among the coolest things in the world. His enthusiasm grew as he helped his father fell small-diameter trees for firewood, with his father letting him do things with very few limits.

– In upper secondary school, I was debating whether to work in construction or forestry, and while I was in the army, I made my decision.

Over the years, Mikko has met many forest owners. Just like Ville Sirkka, whom he describes as active and open-minded, the forestry expert considers protecting diversity important.

– There is clearly a change under way. Forest owners are already leaving some of their forest in a natural state, environmental matters are now better taken into account in forest management, valuable sites are being protected, and owners see that the same forest can be both a commercial forest and a recreational forest at the same time.

Mikko describes his job as both customer service and troubleshooting, at the core of which is listening to the forest owner-customer's wishes and goals. If foolish measures are being taken in the forest, it is important to speak up about it. On the other hand, if a forest owner is looking to sell his trees, an optimal solution must be sought. A professional should also be able to say when it is not the right time for felling.

– My general hope is for forest owners to take care of their forests. That may mean different things to different people, concludes Mikko. ✕

"We want to engage in long-term co-operation with forest owners and meet all forest-related needs based on the one-stop-shop principle."

– Pietari Niemi



WESTAS AIMS TO BE A PARTNER TO FOREST OWNERS

The year in wood trade has gone largely as usual, with a busy spring and sluggish start to autumn. Even though prices have now come down slightly, we are still close to historically high figures.

Spring timber trade kicked off in Westas's procurement area at the turn of March–April, gradually gaining momentum until Midsummer. Trade was boosted by rising log prices, but the abundance of supply nevertheless came as somewhat of a surprise.

– It appears as though all the best and vast forest stands waiting for the right moment were put up for sale in spring, says Westas's Purchasing Manager **Pietari Niemi**.

A SUMMER WITH NO SURPRISES

Since mid-summer, the prices of all timber grades have gradually come down from their historically high level, but price ratios have also changed.

– In regeneration fellings, spruce is priced higher than

pine, but in thinnings, there is essentially no difference, says Niemi.

Summertime fellings went primarily without a hitch, and even though a week-long period of heavy rain hit in August, the dry early autumn offered excellent felling conditions. Despite the dry and hot early summer, we avoided large-scale insect damage, although according to Niemi, every year brings more spruce bark beetle sightings in Westas's procurement area. The situation is often only noticed when the tree branches begin drying up.

– When the destruction has reached that point, we are already too late for those trees. In order to protect other stands and avoid further destruction, fellings in the area should be taken care of as soon as possible, stresses Niemi.

STILL A GOOD TIME FOR WOOD TRADE

The start of autumn wood trade in mid-August has been calm but, in some respects, even better than expected.

– Spring was so good that the current supply has been surprising in comparison. On the other hand, the calm pace also indicates that work in the fields is not yet finished. There is still time, however, since the season is likely to continue here in western Finland until mid-December, Niemi points out.

He reminds forest owners that even though the sawn timber market is challenging right now, Westas will still be interested in buying high-quality spruce and pine logs in the future.

– Right now, a lot of winter-focussed sites are on offer, although the stand sizes are much smaller than in the spring. We are, however, interested in all kinds of sites, big and small, spring thaw sites, summer stands, first thinnings and regeneration fellings.

According to Niemi, forest owners are slowly starting to take advantage of the forest management services Westas offers, and these sites have been growing steadily. In particular, the number of turnkey projects – soil preparation, saplings and planting – has increased. Going forward, more focus will be placed on these services.

– We want to engage in long-term co-operation with forest owners and meet all forest-related needs based on the one-stop-shop principle. We don't just take wood away, we are here to make sure that high-quality logs grow in forests for years to come, Niemi stresses. ✕

FROM CHAINSAWING TO HARVESTER CONTRACTING

Raimo Vastamaa has been a machinery contractor since 1988. His first encounters with various machines were as a child. He started driving a tractor as soon as he could reach the pedals. His first forest machine was a chainsaw.

Raimo Vastamaa followed in his father's footsteps to the world of heavy machinery and started mechanised forest work back in the 1980s with a tractor processor. He has worked in forests ever since and is known for his high-quality work and reliability in his area of operation. Co-operation with Westas has offered continuity. Vastamaa reckons that he must have done something right, since he receives invitations to contract negotiations at the sawmill time and time again.

WHO ARE YOU?

I am Raimo Vastamaa, the owner of Metsäkoneurakointi Vastamaa Oy in Vesilahti, near Tampere.

PERSONNEL AND TURNOVER?

Last year's turnover was around 1.2 million euros. In addition to me, we have five permanent drivers and two drivers who are called in when needed. The stand-by drivers are very valuable to us. Workers with such experience and skills are hard to come by.

EQUIPMENT?

We have two harvesters and four forwarders, plus one transport truck. One harvester is equipped with a large harvester head, the other with a mid-sized head. Early on, we had a few Valmets, but in 1994 we bought our first Ponsse, and since 1996 all our machines have been Ponsse.

WHAT ARE YOU GOOD AT?

We have been working in the same area and with the same crew for a long time, so we know the region and the forest owners. It makes our work much easier. Our area of logging, South Pirkanmaa, is good because the spring thaw is not bad and the volume of timber per hectare is high compared to many other areas.

WHAT IS THE OUTLOOK?

The future looks somewhat concerning. The spruce bark beetle is spreading and destroying forests, while forest policy is heading in a direction that threatens our livelihood. At the same time, forest owners are awfully quiet in the public debate concerning their assets.

ANY REQUESTS FOR FOREST OWNERS?

Forest owners need a change in attitude or a new kind of drive. Fewer and fewer forest owners are showing interest in their assets or in managing them. Forests are a high-value asset, and at the moment it seems that decision-makers are more interested in them than some forest owners.

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE AVAILABILITY OF LABOUR?

No, I am not. You just have to find the right people. You do not necessarily need formal training, you can learn on the job. What you do need is the right attitude and an interest in the job and the machines.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT FORESTS?

There is a certain freedom to this job. Naturally, fellings are done as agreed, but there is still some wiggle room left for the contractor.

WHAT DOES RAIMO VASTAMAA DO WHEN DRIVING A HARVESTER?

I am pretty much on the phone, and the radio is always on. I like to listen to all kinds of pop music. ✕

"Forests are a high-value asset."

— Raimo Vastamaa



SUSTAINABILITY REPORT GUIDES AND MEASURES OPERATIONS

Westas published its first-ever sustainability report this year. Our sustainability work aims to increase the openness and transparency of our operations, but also to improve the chosen indicators and actions behind them.



"Responsible operating principles form the basis for profitable and sustainable business."

— Pekka Kopra

Photo: Pasi Leino

Corporate sustainability is often referred to by the acronym "ESG", which stands for the three areas of sustainability: Environmental, Social and Governance. In their sustainability reports, companies disclose the impacts of their operations in these three areas.

Sustainability reporting is based on setting up company-specific criteria and action-based processes so that the development of the different areas can be monitored and measured over the years. Although there are basic rules for measuring and monitoring sustainability, it is always the company management that sets the targets and the areas to be monitored within the company. The management is in charge of the entire process, which includes creating the annual report and monitoring the chosen indicators. The reason for this is that the management has final accountability for the company's finances and people, and the environment.

Westas's first sustainability report was drawn up as a co-operative effort by the management, employees and stakeholders. As a result of a stakeholder survey and internal workshops, main themes identified included well-being at work, employee safety, stakeholder engagement and reliable partnerships, competence development and product safety.

— Responsible operating principles form the basis for profitable and sustainable business. By reporting on these themes, we want to increase openness both within the company and toward our stakeholders, says Westas's Managing Director **Pekka Kopra**.

LITRES, TONNES AND PIECES

Taking care of the forest environment, committing to shared climate targets, and social and economic sustainability have been chosen as the most important cornerstones of Westas's sustainability. Contents and indicators for these themes were chosen to support continuous improvement and monitor the state of affairs. By committing to, for example, the Finnish

Sawmills Association's Environmental Forestry Programme, Westas strive to improve and safeguard the biodiversity of forests.

— We monitor the mix of tree species, and the volume of game thickets, decaying wood and artificial stumps, among other things, lists Kopra.

As part of environmental sustainability, Westas also monitors and aims to reduce its carbon footprint. The indicators monitored include the consumption of electricity and thermal energy, the amount of delivered biofuels and sawn timber's carbon footprint. Noise, water use and waste volumes are also reported in detail by unit.

— Water is used in the process only for cooling the blades, and it is absorbed by the by-products. Although no wastewater is generated, we regularly monitor the quality of storm water and ground water. There is also no production waste since all the by-products are utilised. Other waste is carefully sorted, and we also encourage our customers to recycle the packaging material, Kopra elaborates.

FOCUS ON HUMAN WELL-BEING

The Group employs just over 170 people, and the number of different job titles totals nearly 30. As part of attending to the well-being of the employees, Westas maintains and develops their skills through training. Training is also available to our contractors, and employees who want to take part in job rotation have the opportunity to do so.

Careers at Westas are long, 12.4 years on average, and the main reason for employee turnover is retirement. In addition to measures by occupational health care and the early support model, increased attention is also given to employees' well-being outside working hours. The Group organises common recreational sports and offers exercise and culture vouchers. Employee well-being and occupational safety indicators include the number of occupational accidents and absences due illness. The goal is zero accidents. In 2022, the figure was four.

— We continuously improve the safety of the work environment. We take a preventative approach to shortcomings, and we have various documented instructions for unexpected events, Kopra says.

ATTENDING TO THE ENTIRE CHAIN

One element of sustainability is governance, which is expected to be transparent and open.

— We operate according to laws and decrees, and more detailed operating instructions are given in our Code of Conduct. Our tax footprint, 10.7 million euros, is also public information. Moreover, governance also includes intellectual property rights, non-disclosure agreements and information security. We monitor compliance with these and regularly assess our practices related to, for example, information security.

In addition to our employees and contractors, our focus is on both forest owners and customers: forest owners provide the raw material which is processed into products in accordance with customer orders.

— We are a partner to forest owners and wish to promote forest health together with them. Our goal is to provide advice and guidance to forest owners and improve the state of forests in co-operation with them.

The last link in the chain is the customer, and all the cogs in the company machinery have been fine-tuned to serve them. To that end, customer satisfaction is measured regularly, and the quality of products is controlled both manually and mechanically.

— Customers are also interested in forest management. As a guarantee of compliance with industry certifications, we provide our customers with an order-specific report on the certification and origin of the raw material. That way, they also receive documentation for their own sustainability reporting, Kopra sums up. ✕

"Without a sponsor like Westas, we could never have made such investments in the club's activities."

— Karo Friman





SUPPORTING LOCAL SPORTS CLUBS

Corporate social responsibility extends beyond the company's perimeters. Promoting a sense of community, supporting recreational activities and volunteer work are examples of how a company can demonstrate social responsibility. Westas invests in children and youths, which means the VG-62 junior players will train and play their home games in Westas-Areena for the next three years.

For sixty years now, the sports club VG-62 has been home to players of football, ice hockey, ringette and volleyball, as well as figure skating enthusiasts in and around Naantali in Southwest Finland. Football is by far the club's most popular sport, with more than 500 children, adolescents and adults of the club's total membership of 900 taking part.

– We have some twenty teams in different age categories, says the chair of the football section, **Karo Friman**.

According to Friman, the number of the club's football players has doubled in four years, which is quite remarkable in a city like Naantali, which only has around 20,000 inhabitants. As a testament to football's popularity, the boys' team in the age category of 15 got promoted to the first division for the first time in fifteen years.

– In recent years, we have worked hard for our juniors, and it's a pleasure to see it bear fruit.

A BOOST FOR TRAINING

This spring, Westas and VG-62 signed a three-year co-operation agreement. The sponsorship helps the club develop its football activities and invest in the training conditions and equipment. The most important area of development, however, is coaching.

– The junior players' parents are often in charge of coaching, and we have focussed on providing training for them and improving their knowledge and skill levels for quite a while now. We have the largest number of trained coaches in Southwest Finland, Friman says proudly.

Westas's support has also made it possible to hire a second full-time coach. **Telmo Manninen** has been in charge of coaching the under-12-year-olds, and now VG-62 could hire another national-level junior football coach: **Leo Tommila**, who started as the head of the academy, is in charge of coaching the over-12-year-olds. Both Manninen and Tommila have UEFA A coaching licences.

Friman says that ensuring continuity and keeping players and skaters in the club means that the activities must be developed and quality maintained. This is the goal of the now increased resources.

– Without a sponsor like Westas, we could never have made such investments in the club's activities. They have a big impact on our entire operation, and I cannot express how grateful our club activists are for the partnership, Friman says. ✕

PRODUCTION PLANNING IS ENDLESS OPTIMISATION

*For the past ten years, **Päivi Kilku** has been making sure that Pihlava Sawmill performs like a well-tuned orchestra. Ensuring that raw material is used as optimally as possible and that the products sawn from the logs are exactly what customers have ordered is at the heart of the production planner's job.*

Päivi Kilku grew up surrounded by forests, but she has also been into technology from a very young age. Mathematics and physics were her strong suits at school, so it felt only natural for her to pursue wood technology studies at Helsinki University of Technology. In spring 2013, towards the end of her master of science studies, Päivi moved to Pori and secured an internship at Pihlava Sawmill.

– During the internship, I was given the chance to plan everything from log sorting to packaging. It served as an excellent induction to my current job, which I started in autumn of the same year.

MASTERING THE ENTIRE CHAIN FROM STUMP TO BLADES

Päivi's job as a production planner could be compared to that of a chef: you have to concoct the best possible end result from the raw materials you have. The starting point of the customer-driven process are the timber deals made by the sales department. They are used to plan the sawing period – the products and their sawing order. The planning of the sawing period starts with a bucking proposal submitted directly to harvesters' price matrix. The proposal is reviewed

with the forest department before bucking in order to ensure the most precise sawlog yield.

– In the next phase, we receive logs of different diameters at the sawmill which I know will yield certain products. I compare the range of logs to the closed deals and draw up instructions for the log sorter on how to sort the logs for sawing, Päivi explains.

Once the logs are sorted, Päivi prepares blade setting instructions for the saw, i.e. what products will be sawn. The plans must take into account the deal volumes, promised delivery times and drying batches. A critical approach and precision are constantly required.

– If you make a mistake with the dimension sorting instructions, you may end up having a load of 3.9-metre sawn timber, instead of 4.0 metres. That means having to start all over again. And it may take up to a month before getting suitable logs again, Päivi says.

TECHNOLOGY AND GUT INSTINCT

In ten years, Pihlava Sawmill's production volumes have doubled, and there have been huge leaps in the measuring technology. For Päivi, the best thing in the progress of technology is probably real time operation.


– Nowadays everyone has access to the same information at the same time. It has definitely improved our processes.

Although technology now plays a major role, in the end experience is needed, especially when the markets are slower.

– A skilled production planner has an idea and a gut feeling about what products to saw in order to find buyers.

In addition to logical thinking, a production planner needs an overall understanding of how the sawmill works and the ability to pay attention to several things simultaneously. Co-operation skills are also necessary, since a production planner serves as the interface between many functions and employees at the sawmill.

– I love coming to work – I have the best colleagues and the freedom to plan my own work. It gives me tremendous joy when I'm able to predict the products that can be sawn from the logs and see the final products shipped off. ✕

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is shown in profile, looking out of a window. She is wearing a green sweater and has her right hand raised, with fingers slightly spread. The background is a blurred view of a city or office building through the window.

"A skilled production planner has an idea and a gut feeling about what products to saw in order to find buyers."

– Päivi Kilkku

GLOBAL SAWN TIMBER MARKET IN THE DOLDRUMS

The unprecedented rise in the sawn timber markets seen in the past few years has reached the end of the road. The weakening of the economy has affected consumption, construction and industry and, by extension, the sawn timber market as well.

Signs of a dwindling sawn timber market were in the air already at the end of 2022, when prices fell dramatically and demand plummeted. Nevertheless, a small uptick was seen in the second quarter of this year, until weakened construction volumes also started to show in the markets.

– Consumption declined and prices fell due to the subsequent oversupply situation, says **Juha Numminen**, Westas's exports sales manager, recalling the turning point in the markets.

The reasons behind the weakened consumption were already known and, in particular, the end of cheap energy in Germany, Europe's economic engine, was behind the country's problems.

– Germany has been our fourth most important export country, with our sales there including both heartwood and unedged slabs. The traditionally strong sawn timber market is now suffering, however, says Numminen.

In the neighbouring countries of Austria and Switzerland, the situation has remained more normal, and France, which has often been sensitive to fluctuations in the global economy, has at least so far remained active. There is also positive news from the Netherlands, where the price level has remained better than, for instance, in Germany, and from Estonia, which has become Westas's sixth most important export country.

– We used to export only spruce heartwood to Estonia, but now we also export pine there. Estonia is home to wood-intensive industry, and thanks to the short distance between our countries, logistics costs are also reasonable, Numminen points out.

For Finland, however, the situation is bleak. Construction activity has reached record low levels, with only a tiny volume of trade since summer. Finland has been competing with Japan for Westas's top market spot, and

now exports to Japan have also cooled. Due to high costs and general inflation, construction has lost momentum in Japan too, and laminated pine trade, which was stable for a long time, has experienced a downturn. Another important product in the country has been spruce Genban, which has not been quite as sensitive to cyclical fluctuations but has also experienced smaller export volumes.

In China, demand has been modest and prices have remained weak for several years now. The heating up of the global sawn timber markets during the Covid-19 pandemic did not affect China, where, as a result of Covid lockdowns, the economy slowed, warehouses filled up and prices remained low. The situation has not changed at any point, and this year Westas has imported products into the country on only two occasions: right at the start of the year and then again only in September.

ALL QUIET IN THE DESERT SAND COUNTRIES

The situation in northern Africa has remained unchanged for some time now. Egypt struggles with currency issues, but goods are nevertheless being imported into the country at a steady pace. Sawn timber enquiries from Algeria increased at the start of the year, and prices during the summer were still reasonable. The tide has now turned, however, and prices have started to fall. The price level in Morocco has also been weak.

– How the earthquake and the efforts to repair the destruction caused by it will affect sawn timber demand remains to be seen, says Numminen.

The significant spruce board market of Saudi Arabia and the Israeli market, which is important for Westas, are both afflicted with the same "disease".

– The problem is not that there is a lack of demand, but that prices are so low across the board. For certain products, the challenge is in finding a satisfactory solution. The high price of raw materials and increase in the price of energy and

overheads create a difficult equation in which sawmills have zero profitability. In summer, raw materials already made up 80 per cent of the price of sawn timber, stresses Numminen.

TRUST IN PARTNERSHIP

Fourth-quarter contract negotiations are under way, and Numminen says the order book nevertheless looks good compared to the same period last year.


– We always have buyers for customer products, and we don't have a surplus even in a weaker economic situation. It is important to get volume products, such as slabs, moving. If industry that uses those products freezes, warehouses will soon fill up.

Numminen points out that there is not just a single factor behind the current problems, but rather it is a sum of many factors in the global markets. Where weakened consumption has driven Finnish house factories to hard times, the same mechanism is at work everywhere in the world.

– When consumption cools, construction cools. Next, the problems will hit, for example, the packaging industry. An individual sawmill has very few means to influence these chains of events; all they can do is hold on tight and try to survive. What goes down must also come up at some point. It has always been like that in this industry, he says.

Numminen does not believe that the turn of the year will ease the situation, but instead describes the outlook as sluggish. But the strategy is still clear.

– We have a good product and we trust that our regular customers will continue to be our partners in good times, but also in somewhat weaker times too. We took care of them when products were selling like hotcakes, and that is what partnership is all about. We do our best in terms of quality and service, and we will make it over this hump smoothly too, reckons Numminen. ✕

A man wearing a bright yellow high-visibility safety jacket with reflective silver stripes and the 'WESTAS' logo on the chest. He is also wearing an orange safety cap and glasses. He is smiling and holding up a blue tarp with his right hand. The background is a blurred blue sky. A quote is overlaid on the upper left side of the image.

"The problem is not that there is a lack of demand, but that prices are so low across the board."

– Juha Numminen

EXCELLING IN CHALLENGES

Sometimes doing things the hard way pays off. OT-Control's early decision to focus on the most challenging part of the process has earned the company a reputation as a supplier of even the most complex automation solutions.

The Finnish Heinola-based company OT-Control has been supplying electrical and automation solutions to various industries for over 30 years and co-operates continuously with Westas. Over the past two years, the companies have been modernising the automation systems of the sawmill feed, ground floor and sawline at Koski Sawmill. At the Pihlava site, automation control, process control and the blade setting system have also been modernised.

– The blade setting system is the key to which blades and settings are used to run the mill, says OT-Control's Managing Director **Jukka Pakarinen**.

The company was established in the 1990s under the name Ohjaustaito in Joensuu, Eastern Finland, by **Pentti Pakarinen**, and it quickly focussed on becoming a trusted supplier to sawmills. Initially, the company's expertise was centred around the sawline, but gradually the solutions offering expanded to other parts of the process.

– At first, the company focussed on the most challenging feature of the sawmill, the servo control. The lines make a lot of use of servo control, and there are several variables over a short distance. It is automation's job to make sure there are no bottlenecks and all the movements take place at the right time, Pakarinen explains further.





"At first, the company focussed on the most challenging feature of the sawmill, the servo control."

– Jukka Pakarinen

TAILORED IN CO-OPERATION

Jukka Pakarinen points out that the level of automation has increased at sawmills over the years, and consequently, the number of equipment and solutions has grown. For its deliveries, OT-Control strives to choose components that have the properties required by the customer and which also offer a sufficiently long life cycle.

– We have also seen short-lived "shooting star" products. They may have a tempting price, but often they lack some of the required properties and durability, says the Managing Director.

This is part of the reason why OT-Control wants to get involved in the planning of sawmill modernisation projects as early as possible. Having a say in the components of the solution is essential for the end result.

– The components must meet our requirements for us to be able to guarantee well-functioning automation. The automation equipment must be of sufficiently high quality so that we are able to programme a solution that gives the end result that the customer wants.

For the customer, automation's biggest value is in its usability. That is why OT-Control focuses on the user-friendliness of the solution, in addition to reliability and improved production efficiency. Everything is based on OT-Control's standard solution, but the final delivery is tailored to customer needs.

– No two sawmills are alike. Customers have, almost without exception, legacy machines and production lines, and

integrating these to the modernised section requires tailoring. We work together with the customer, and ideally the operators of the line are also involved in the project since they know it better than anyone else.

EXPERIENCE COMPENSATES FOR MISSING DOCUMENTATION

The most critical element in the design and implementation of automation systems is the interface – aligning the old with the new. Having the existing systems' and equipment's information available is essential for a smooth transfer into the new ones.

– More often than not, however, this information is not available. There may only be partial documentation or none whatsoever. That is when our experience comes into play: thanks to our long history, we are pretty well aware of how the lines have been built and how different suppliers' machinery works. That allows us to take things forward.

In addition to broad know-how of different machine suppliers' mechanics, our employees have first-hand experience of the sawing process itself. Several OT-Control employees are former sawmill operators who have switched over to programming.

– The labour shortage has been an issue for quite a while now. We have, in fact, started training our own experts, including quite a few students, but we also have, for example, sawmill employees switching careers.

SAWMILL WORK IN TRANSFORMATION

Nowadays, IoT – automated communication between devices and systems as well as remote monitoring and control – is also an integral part of sawmills' automation solutions. Data collection systems can store, for example, all the events on the production line, and this data can be used in production planning.

– Blades' cutting time per shift, the number of times safety gates open and related reasons – whatever data the customer wants, it can be collected, Pakarinen points out.

The company also constantly develops new solutions, such as smart camera technology, whose information can be used to control the process. The managing director does not, however, agree with the claim that automation will eventually take over sawmill jobs – they will simply take new shape.

– The amount of gathered data and everything that can and should be controlled with automation has increased tremendously. The pressure is now on the system users – there is plenty of data, but the question is how do companies use it and do they know how to use everything that it offers? With increasing data processing, the need for experts also grows, which means that jobs are transferred from the sawing line to computers. Artificial intelligence helps process the data and screen out from the enormous amount of data what is relevant in terms of supporting and fine-tuning the process. At the end of the day, it is still humans making the final decisions on the basis of this data, Pakarinen concludes. ✕

TERMINAL READY FOR ACTION

Westas's chipping station, which started up in March of this year in Masku, near Turku, is preparing for its first full heating season.

Westas's terminal area and chipping station in Masku is unparalleled in Finland. In addition to wood reception and intermediate storage, in the four-hectare area wood is processed into fuel chips for use by heating and power plants in the Turku area.

Two people work at the terminal as needed, receiving the wood raw material and handling the chipping. Wood raw material deliveries take place around the clock, but wood chipping only takes place during daytime on weekdays. The terminal's brand-new chipping station is the first of its kind built by a wood fuel supplier in Finland, and it is a testament to Westas's pioneering development work related to forest energy. The electrically driven chipping station is more efficient and environmentally friendly and generates less noise than a traditional combustion engine-driven station.

Loads arriving during the heating season are chipped immediately, while in summertime, loads are stored in an asphalt yard to await chipping. The loads are stored for an average of 2 to 6 months, during which time the wood material dries to a sufficiently low moisture content in terms of combustion.

The ready chips are either transported by a wheel loader and loaded either directly onto a full trailer or transferred by a conveyor to the asphalt yard for storing. From the storage pile, the fuel continues its journey to boilers at the latest one month after having been turned into chips.

AN EFFECTIVE LOCAL CONCEPT

The terminal's main product is chips from energy wood, but the area also contains reserve inventories of sawdust and chipped forest residue.

— The inventories are important in terms of security of supply. They help secure the Turku region's heat supply even in possible emergency situations, for instance, when raw material deliveries are disrupted, explains Westas's Bioenergy Manager **Juha Vahtera**.

Raw material is brought to the terminal from a roughly 150 km radius, from the fellings of Westas's forest owner-partners. Every year, fuels amounting to 300 GWh leave the terminal for biomass boilers for the area's energy production. This translates to some 3,000 full trailer loads.

— With good reason, this can be referred to as local fuel production. We procure raw material from areas near the

terminal, process it into a usable form and deliver the ready fuel to nearby plants to meet the energy needs of the region's homes and businesses. We are considering replicating the concept also in Westas's other important wood procurement areas, such as Satakunta and Pirkanmaa, says Vahtera.

From a forest owner's perspective, the use of energy wood has provided a good alternative alongside pulpwood. The cost-effective terminal only processes Finnish wood, and fixed delivery agreements ensure good demand for forest owners' energy wood. Vahtera describes the future of wood's energy use as stable.

— The energy business as part of the sawmilling industry is here to stay. For forest owners, that means added value and stability from their wood sales, since unlike other industries, the energy industry is not sensitive to economic cycles. Winter will come next year, too, he concludes. ✕

"With good reason, this can be referred to as local fuel production."

— Juha Vahtera

THE KING OF OUTDOOR GAMES TRAVELS IN A SPRUCE CRATE

After leaving the mill, sawn timber takes different routes to destinations all over the world. You might come across spruce sawn by Westas, for example, in the backyard of a Paraguayan home, where adults and children alike have gathered to play a Finnish game.

Tactic Oy is a Finnish company that focusses on developing board games, outdoor games, books and toys. The company has its origins in a garage in the city of Pori. In 1967, **Aarne Heljakka** got excited about a board game his relatives brought over from the US. He obtained the manufacturing rights, had the moulds made and launched the production of Kimble® in his own home. Business soon took off, and over the years Heljakka's company, which was known for its colourful ideas and innovative sales approaches, grew into an international player, whose products are nowadays sold in more than 70 countries.

Tactic Games is still based in Pori, with subsidiaries both in Europe and the US, and holds a strong position in the board games and outdoor games market. Despite its global footprint, Tactic remains to this day a responsible family business with around 240 employees. The company keeps Aarne Heljakka's legacy alive by continuing to develop innovative games.

SKITTLES FLYING ALL OVER THE WORLD

Tactic launches dozens of new games every year. In addition to Kimble, the Pori-based company has developed Alias and Choco, well-known games in Finland.

– All of our board games, books and wooden games are made in Finland. Domestic production guarantees quality and sustainability, says Tactic's Marketing Manager **Jemina Heljakka**.

One of Tactic's best-selling products is Mōlkky®. Developed in Finland some twenty years ago, this outdoor game is sold all over the world and is popular, for example, in Japan and France, in addition to Finland. The vast majority, around 95 per cent, is exported, and with the exception of Antarctica, the game is played on all continents.

Mōlkky is played outdoors on open, level ground. Success in the game is based partly on skill, partly on chance. The aim is to knock over the numbered pins of different sizes by throwing a so-called skittle at them, and the first player to score exactly 50 points is the winner. Mōlkky is known as a fun, social yard game, but the multi-award-winning game has also evolved into a sport with annual World Championship games.

– Currently we make about half a million Mōlkky games a year, but with the new production plant investment our capacity will substantially increase, Heljakka says.

DURABLE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

The cylindrical Mōlkky pins and throwing skittle are made of Finnish birch, while the combined retail, storage and transport package, or crate, is made of Finnish spruce.

– Wood gives the game a traditional, natural look. Wood is also a durable and environmentally friendly material, which makes it the perfect, sustainable choice for an outdoor game, Heljakka says and adds: – This is local production par excellence, since the raw material for the crates is harvested, sawn, further-processed and assembled within a very small geographical area.

The marketing manager points out that the packaging is there to protect the game during transport and storage, and to keep the pins and skittle neatly in place. Since the wooden pins and the throwing skittle are fairly heavy and the game is carried and played outdoors, the packaging material must be strong.

The spruce for the packaging is sawn by Westas and planed by the Meri-Porin Saha sawmill right next to Westas's Pihlava Sawmill. The two wood processing companies have worked together since the 1990s, and they have been supplying products for Tactic as of 2017, when Tactic took over the manufacture of Mōlkky.

– We do the planing for the crate frame material and profiled boards. We fetch the spruce sawn timber needed for them with dimensions of 25x100 mm and 19x100 mm from just across the yard, says Meri-Porin Saha's Managing Director **Teemu Tuominen** with a laugh.

The planed sawn timber is cut into blanks at Tactic's plant just over ten kilometres away. Then the crates are assembled, the braided carrying rope is attached and the Mōlkky symbol is branded to the crate side. One cubic metre of spruce is sufficient for nearly 300 crates.

– The amount of spruce per crate is not huge, but at an annual level, the raw material volumes are substantial and will increase in the future. Our aim is to make a million Mōlkky games per year, Heljakka concludes. ✕



CHINA'S MARKET UNDERGOING A TRANSFORMATION

Sawn timber exports from Finland to China started to grow in the 2010s and peaked in 2017 with more than 1.7 million cubic metres exported. As economic cycles have changed, volumes have come down, but China was still the fourth most important export market for Finnish sawmills in 2022, with 900,000 cubic metres.

"The Chinese are committed to co-operation and appreciate the way Finns commit to the market in good times and bad."

— Daniel Guo

Active export efforts throughout the 2010s helped open up the Chinese markets to Finnish sawmills. Strong state-driven construction boosted growth in trade, but at the same time, China's own wood processing industry started to emerge. As a result, China's dependency on imported sawn timber has been declining since 2019, and two years ago, in 2021, China's domestic production exceeded sawn timber imports. Lower demand due to the Covid-19 pandemic also played a role, resulting in a 30 per cent decline in sawn timber imports in 2020–2022.

RUSSIA DOMINATES

Russia has been strongly dominating the Chinese markets and has retained its market share despite the declining demand. Due to the war in Ukraine, the EU, UK and United States imposed an import ban on Russian and Belarusian sawn timber, which steered Russia's trade flows more heavily to China. The share of sawn timber import from Belarus to China has also increased. In 2022, Russia's market share in sawn timber was 69 per cent, and other countries competing with Finnish sawmills include Canada, Sweden and Germany.

Russian exports have benefitted from the weaker rouble and state transport subsidies to companies, which have pushed down the prices of Russian sawn timber in China to record-low levels, making competition stiffer. In spite of this, Finland is still the third most important importer of softwood sawn timber, with a share of five per cent. Currently, Russia's competitive edge is undermined only by the lack of FSC and PEFC certifications as a result of its war of aggression against Ukraine.

China is also a major log importer. For years, its main trade partner has been New Zealand, but the insect damage in Europe increased the share of roundwood imports from, for example, Germany and the Czech Republic. Russia used to be China's third biggest supplier of wood raw material, but after the roundwood export ban in 2022, volumes have dropped to zero. As the stream of logs from Russia has dried up and insect-damaged wood from Europe is starting to run low, it is expected that China may even be hit by a raw material shortage. The situation is alleviated by, for example, Japan, which has significantly increased its log imports to China. Moreover, China will increase its felling volumes in order to secure raw material supply.

USE OF WOOD TAKING NEW SHAPE

Overall, softwood's share of sawn timber used in China has fallen rapidly. While in 2021 its share was 81 per cent, the following year it fell to 68 per cent. Paper, construction and furniture have been the main uses of wood raw material in

China, which also exports a fifth of its wood-based products.

Now as China's economy is weakening, consumption is shifting and demand for sawn timber and processed wood products will be weak in the short term. The need for construction has declined as a result of changed demographics, and consequently, the real estate market is crashing. New construction starts fell as much as 24.5 per cent in the first half of the year compared to the same period in the previous year.

The real estate market slowdown has had direct impacts on the furniture industry, which has also suffered from the trade war between the US and China. The situation between the two countries is not expected to improve any time soon, and the export of wood products and furniture from China is expected to focus increasingly on Asia, Russia, Brazil, South Africa and India.

Despite the weak demand, the consumption of wood-based products is not declining; the volume per capita is even expected to increase in the future. End use is focused more on the packaging industry, landscaping and garden construction and private consumption, and since China is the second largest consumer market in the world, the volumes are substantial. The increasing use of sawn timber and long-lasting wood products is also supported by China's goal of being carbon neutral by 2060. The construction sector accounts for 51.2 per cent of emissions in China, so reductions are necessary. In construction, there are signs of increased use of CLT and glulam, which also provides opportunities for Finnish sawn timber suppliers.

AN AGENT AT BOTH THE CUSTOMER'S AND SAWMILL'S SERVICE

After graduating from university in mechanical engineering, Daniel Guo worked briefly in the automotive industry. Through his networks, he soon started co-operation with a Swedish export promotion project and worked as a consultant for the Nordic Timber Council for four years. That is also when he came into contact with sawn timber for the first time.

– I set up my own company, learned the basics of the sawing process and sawn timber, and started to look for business opportunities in China, says Daniel, who has been Westas's agent for quite a while now.

Not long after that, he also became interested in Finnish sawmills. After some thorough background surveys, he contacted Raunio Sawmill in 2012.

– I found Raunio's strategy a good match for the Chinese markets, and my discussions with Sales Director **Erkki Koskelo** led to the decision to start a brief trial period, he recounts.

The trial batches of a few hundred cubic metres quickly grew into tens of thousands. The peak year was 2019, when

a total of 40,000 m³ were delivered. During the Covid years, there was a shift in the Chinese markets, however, and volumes fell.

RELIABLE TRADE PARTNER

Daniel describes the role of an agent as a sort of middleman. While the agent has to be familiar with the sawn timber supplier's products, strengths and added value for the customer, they also need to understand the customer and their business.

– It is the agent's job to find out where customers are and what products they need or could buy. Market insight is also important. Furthermore, my role involves hosting visits and working as an interpreter.

Westas's main customers in China include, first and foremost, manufacturers of children's furniture. Finnish sawn timber has a good reputation in China, and Finnish quality is considered to be the best of the Nordic countries. The way Finns do business is also appreciated.

– The Chinese are committed to co-operation and appreciate the way Finns commit to the market in good times and bad. Westas's production, packaging and way of doing business as a whole are given credit, and once a price is agreed on, customers know exactly what they will get. Even if they don't get what they expected, they know that the sawmill takes claims seriously and reacts promptly. Customers have a feeling of security when dealing with Westas, Guo explains.

China's markets declined as a result of the pandemic, and normal economic activity slowed down. At the same time, the entire economy changed. The construction and housing markets, which used to be brisk, plummeted. This resulted in a stall among Westas's customers, as the booming housing business also used to fuel the furniture industry. In addition to the waning economy, the war in Ukraine has overshadowed the sawn timber markets.

– Russia is flooding China with sawn timber, and oversupply is pushing down prices. The expensive raw material and cost structure of Finnish sawmills makes competing difficult. For the current dynamics to change, the war would have to end. Recovery of the real estate market may also help normalise the situation, Guo concludes. ✕

WESTAS

***YOU HAVE A FOREST.
WE HAVE A SAW.***

***THANK YOU FOR
YOUR CO-OPERATION.***



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