Horse Extraction in Continuous Cover

by Billy Anderson and Duncan Ireland

The role of horses in British forestry may have diverged from purpose-built machinery over the last 100 years. But recent experience of combining horses and mechanised extraction has shown positive benefits that could be highly advantageous to CCF.

This experience echoes that of felling when combining a motor-manual operator with mechanised harvesting where crop conditions or terrain become limiting to harvesting machinery.

Using horse extraction to accumulate produce for onward movement by mechanised forwarder takes advantage of the traditional benefits of the horse, while also optimising output with wheeled machinery. Logs are pulled to a permanent extraction trail where the forwarder can pick them up for onward extraction.

Horse logging has, in recent years benefited from developments in technology. A modern range of skidding and forwarding equipment have raised efficiency while still offering
the benefits associated with horses, such as high manoeuvrability, minimal ground disturbance and lower access infrastructure requirements. The potential to reduce erosion and sedimentation also lowers the cost of reinstating access following harvesting.

There are additional environmental advantages to horse logging, primarily the absence of chemicals, which means no spills and reduced emissions. This allows extraction near and across water courses. Horses can reduce soil compaction and be less prone to erosion than mechanised extraction. Horse trails are also narrower and landing sites significantly smaller, so more land can be in productive forest and less area used for logging infrastructure.

![Ground flora recovery 2 weeks after horse extraction](image)

There is likely to be a substantial reduction in damage to residual trees and understorey when extracting with horses because of their high manoeuvrability. These are factors with clear benefits for CCF where preserving the condition of access and minimising the impact to the standing crop are advantageous for the future silviculture of the forest.

The biggest issue some raise with horse logging is the economics! Many people believe it’s not viable but actually the horse is a highly functional multi-tool within the woodland. From basic skidding, to hitching up to a horse forwarder.

Many people see horse logging as nostalgic and old fashioned and whilst we are sure that there is nostalgia lurking in all of us, the horseloggers we know are committed to protecting the woodland, its eco-system and working with nature. Old fashioned? well it’s certainly been around a long time, but progression has helped bring it into the modern era, and recent experiences of combining horse and mechanised extraction demonstrate that horses can still make a valuable contribution to forestry in the 21st century.

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In these days of trying to accomplish a zero carbon footprint, you can rest assured the only footprint the horse leaves is in the soil!

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ABOUT THE CCFG

The Continuous Cover Forestry Group was founded in 1991. Our primary objectives are to promote the transformation of even-aged plantations to structurally, visually and biologically diverse woodlands, and to promote the sustainable management of high quality timber. We play a key role in training and education, and are influential in the formulation of new forest policies in England, Wales and Scotland. We have over 200 individual and corporate members, and membership is open to all with an interest in forestry, forest conservation and woodland environments. The CCFG website gives more information and membership details.

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