

# TIMBERLINE

December 2010 • Volume 16, Number 12

INDUSTRY NEWS & MACHINERY

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## Kiln-Direct Adds Direct Value to Treehugger Farms' Business

By Carolee Anita Boyles

**WESTMORELAND, New Hampshire**—When Jon Clark, owner and president of Treehugger Farms in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, started moving into kiln-dried firewood, he learned very quickly the value of a good kiln. Then when he discovered the Kiln-Direct MiniQuick, he knew he'd come to the right place. His intuition about the MiniQuick was correct, and having it in operation has made a significant difference in the efficiency and profitability of his operation.

"We started in the firewood business in the 1970s on Cape Cod," Jon said. "I grew up in the field, working for my dad, Greg Clark. He had a wood stove shop and a firewood business."

In 1993, Greg and Jon made the decision to move from Cape Cod to the company's current location in Westmoreland.

"On the Cape, we were finding it difficult to get tree-length logs delivered from the New Hampshire area, which is where the wood is located," Jon said. "Rather than truck raw product or round wood down to Cape Cod, we moved the operation to where the wood is."

The business that they established in Westmoreland was very similar to the one they had had on Cape Cod. They built a new stove store there, and continued to sell Lopi wood-fired, gas-fired, and pellet stoves; they also continued with the firewood business.

"We had two log trucks; I ran one, and my dad ran the other one," Jon said. "We would haul logs from local loggers to the sawmills, and then we would buy tree-length firewood and bring it back to our yard. We processed it with a Multitek firewood processor, and did retail deliveries to our local area."

The move to Westmoreland didn't hurt



*Kiln-Direct MiniQuick firewood kiln with loaded baskets staged for the next kiln charge. Treehugger Farms features value-added kiln dried and debarked firewood.*

the Clarks' business in Cape Cod; in fact, it enhanced their business, even though the distance between the two locations is more than 150 miles.

"Now we supply quite a few wholesale accounts on the Cape with split wood," Jon said. "We also do retail deliveries here in New Hampshire. We go as far as Boston and the surrounding area, which is where we do a lot of our wholesale business." They cut entirely mixed hardwoods, including oak, maple, ash, beech, birch, and other species.

As the business grew, the Clarks needed help in the store and office.

"My wife Donna joined us in the office, handling the stove sales and doing paperwork," Jon said.

Jon said he and his wife purchased the business from his father in 1998. Then as Jon's sons Brad and Eric grew up, they joined their parents in the business. Brad recently graduated from the University of New Hampshire with a degree in business,

and now is working in the store handling stove sales and production.

The store sits on three and a half acres, with room behind the retail facility for the rest of the business.

"We have a small showroom and office where we display our stoves," Jon said. We also have a garage where we do the maintenance on our equipment, and several storage buildings where we keep firewood."

From the time Jon and his father moved to Westmoreland in 1993 until 2004, although the business grew, it didn't change very much. In the mid 2000s, however, Jon started seeing a lot more competition on the firewood side of the business.

"We realized that we were going to have to do some things differently, to set ourselves apart from our competition," Jon said. In the past, Jon always sold air-dried firewood and green wood, which is the most common way firewood is sold in the area. Over the last few years, however, the com-





*Multitek firewood processor splits the firewood and fills the baskets with firewood to be kiln dried.*

pany has made some changes in the way they prepare and market their firewood.

The first thing Jon did was add a Morbark debarker.

“Now we debark our firewood logs before we process them into split wood,” he said. “We’ve found that that makes a much cleaner finished product, and our customers appreciate that over our competition’s wood, because their wood typically is dirty. By adding the debarker, we’re able to clean up the wood much better.”

The bark doesn’t go to waste; Treehugger Farms sells it to a company in Massachusetts that hauls it away and grinds it for landscape mulch.

“That’s been a nice way to add value to

our business,” Jon said. “So nothing is wasted. We salvage the bark, we salvage the sawdust, and of course we have the finished product of firewood.”

Jon said some of the sawdust is blended with the bark and goes out for landscape material.

“We also have some local farms that purchase the sawdust from us and use it in their farm operations,” he said.

Besides adding the debarker, Jon said, the company paved the yard.

“For years we just worked on a gravel area, and in wet weather it would get very muddy,” Jon said. “So we paved the area, which was another step toward making our product very clean. It makes a huge differ-

ence in the quality of the wood. It also gives us the ability to save our bark without any rocks, dirt or mud mixed in with it, so the people who come and purchase the bark get a nice, clean product as well.”

Jon also added two ClearSpan buildings to store the finished firewood.

“Having all our wood under cover makes things much nicer in the winter-time,” he said. “When it’s snowing and freezing, we can just back into one of the buildings and pick up dry wood.” One of the ClearSpan structures is 40 feet by 70 feet, and the other one is 25 feet by 35 feet.

In 2007, Jon purchased a kiln so he could produce dried firewood.

“It was a hot water kiln, and it was our first attempt at kiln-dried firewood,” he said. “We struggled along with it, but we got very low production. The wood would dry, but it wasn’t to the quality that we wanted. So we started searching for alternative equipment to upgrade our kiln.”

That search led Jon to Kiln Direct.

“I had talked with Niels Jorgensen, the owner of Kiln Direct, at the Essex Junction Logging Show, very shortly after I purchased my hot water kiln,” he said. “We started to develop a relationship with Niels, and over the last three years, we learned a lot about his kilns.”

As Jon became more and more dissatisfied with the job the hot water kiln was doing, he thought more seriously about purchasing a kiln from Kiln Direct.

“Based on all the information that Niels gave us about drying time and the quality of the wood, we thought his was a much better system for us,” Jon said. “It would increase our production, and also give us a better finished product, that is, a



*Treehugger Farms staff includes (left to right) Jon Clark – owner, Brad Clark – store manager, Shawn Collins – equipment operator, and Frank Couitt – yard foreman.*

*Not pictured are Donna Clark – Jon’s wife and shop secretary, and Eric Clark – Jon’s son and equipment operator.*



much drier piece of wood.”

The other factor, Jon said, was the new rules and regulations for the Emerald Ash Borer and the Asian Longhorned Beetle.

“Those are two insects that are typically thought to be transported in firewood,” he said. “With the Kiln Direct kiln, we’re able to heat treat firewood to the standards that the government has set to stop the spread of these bugs. The Kiln Direct kiln has the ability to not only meet, but exceed the regulations, and that figured into our thinking as well.”

The first step in the installation of the Kiln Direct kiln was to pour a cement pad for it.

“Once we had that, then we ordered our kiln, and Kiln Direct delivered the kiln and the half-cord baskets to put the firewood in,” Jon said. “A technician from Kiln Direct was here for our first startup to make sure everything ran properly. After that, it was just basically put the wood in it and go to work. The people at Kiln Direct have been very helpful to us, from the day we starting running the kiln. Their attitude and helpfulness have been 100 percent for us; everything they said they were going to do, they’ve done, and that’s something you don’t find too much today.”

Jon said the kiln—which is a Kiln Direct MiniQuick—has the ability to hold six cords of wood.

“We installed probes that are drilled into the wood,” he said. “We got those from Kiln Direct also. They monitor the internal temperature of the pieces of wood.”

There are six sensors in Jon’s system, which gives him a very accurate picture of the “cook temperature” of the firewood in the kiln at any given time.

“After about 28-36 hours our wood is kiln dried and heat treated to kill any insects that may have been in the wood,” he said. “Then we remove the dried wood and put in the next batch.”

The MiniQuick offers a couple of different firing options; Jon is using the wood waste system on his.

“We’re able to use byproducts from our processing operation—material that isn’t salable as cordwood—for fuel,” he said.

Installing the kiln, Jon said, had a profound effect on the way Treehugger Farms is able to do business. Much of that stems from changes in the marketplace; having the kiln has allowed the company to respond to those changes.

“Over the past few years, we’ve seen a change in people’s buying habits,” Jon said.



*ClearSpan storage building stores and protects kiln dried firewood. Treehugger Farms provides quality kiln dried and debarked firewood for its customers.*

“In the past, people would buy three to six cords of wood a year in advance and dry it themselves. But the younger generation doesn’t do it that way. They want firewood ‘on demand.’ They don’t want to buy it in the spring and let it sit for a year.”

With the MiniQuick, Jon is able to supply customers with the “on demand” firewood that they want.

“It’s very good quality, no-hassle firewood, that’s very dry,” Jon said. “With the kiln, we can provide firewood that’s a consistent quality and is ready to burn, and we can give it to them on demand. That helps us increase our sales and give better service to our local customers.”

Having the MiniQuick also has allowed Treehugger Farms to expand its customer base.

“It’s brought in new, younger customers for sure,” Jon said. “And now we’re finding that the older generation prefers not to do all that extra work. They can get a cord or two at a time as they need it, instead of having to handle a large volume of wood.”

Treehugger Farms also is able to keep ahead of its competition by using the MiniQuick.

“Particularly during the period from November through January or February, the other companies around here are selling what they call ‘seasoned wood,’” Jon said. “There are a lot of different degrees of ‘seasoned’ wood; it can be anywhere from two months old to two years old, depending on the company providing it. But we’re able to

provide a very consistent, high quality product, and that brings our customers back to us. Then they tell their friends, and their friends come buy from us too.”

Jon also is very pleased that he’s able to provide wood that helps limit the spread of exotic insects that are damaging to the forest industry.

“We’re not only providing a better quality product and bringing in new customers, we’re also helping protect our forests,” he said.

Jon said the future of Treehugger Farms is definitely in kiln-dried firewood.

“That’s partly because of the infestation of the insects, but also because of the quality of our firewood,” he said. “I really feel that our future is going to be all kiln-dried. We just aren’t selling as much green and seasoned wood as we have in the past, but sales of our kiln dried wood are on the rise. Plus, we’re able to ship into areas that have a quarantine on the movement of firewood that hasn’t been heat treated, and that’s helping us expand our business.”

In fact, Jon is so pleased with the MiniQuick that he’s in the process of adding a second one to his business.

“We just purchased another kiln in early November for delivery in early December,” he said, “We are drying 24-30 cord per week and have dried 372 cords of firewood since it was installed in the middle of June. We’re very happy with the result, which is why we are adding a second kiln so we will have the ability to service more customers.”