

Forestry industry going virtual with help of hi-tech headsets

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This article, written by Confor's communications and events adviser David Lee, appeared in the Farm Focus supplement published in both the Press & Journal and Courier newspapers, with a circulation of almost 100,000 around North and East Scotland.

Scotland's forestry and wood processing industry is increasingly embracing cutting-edge technology, with greater use of drones over forests and some of the most advanced sawmills in the world.

Another major development has been the increasing use of Virtual Reality technology in a number of areas - including craning timber on and off lorries more safely.

In 2018, James Jones & Sons Ltd - which has sawmills at Aboyne in Aberdeenshire, Mosstodloch in Moray and Kirriemuir, Angus - invested in two Volvo FH 500 HiVision loglift lorries.

Instead of having to be outside operating the crane to move the logs on and off the lorry, the company's drivers can now manoeuvre the load from the safety and comfort of the cab using a Virtual Reality headset.

The crane operator views the rear-mounted crane arm through the headset, which is fed by high-resolution images from a camera mounted on the crane itself.

The early signs are very positive, according to Jon Ritchie, Area Wood Supply and Transport Manager, North, for James Jones & Sons.

"We got the first lorry in spring 2018 and the second in September - and our primary reason was driver safety," said Mr Ritchie.

"The drivers really like it because it's a lot more comfortable and much safer sitting in the cab and operating with the VR headset than it is being outside. It is also a lot lighter to operate the crane. It's working very well so far and the lorries have been a very positive investment for the business."

The HiVision lorries were bought by James Jones & Sons to operate across the company's operations in the North and East of Scotland, both in the forest and at the three sawmill sites at Aboyne, Mosstodloch and Kirriemuir.

The two lorries, based at the Mosstodloch sawmill, are also fitted with additional cutting-edge technology, including a pressure control system allowing the driver to deflate and

inflate his tyres from the cab to protect forest roads and tracks and ensure continued access during wet weather.

Each lorry also has the Nav Man fleet monitoring system, Tamtron's wireless weight system, Wire-Watcher's overhead cable detection alarms and much more.

David Leslie, Joint Managing Director of James Jones & Sons Ltd, said: "Technology is impacting every industry sector and we hope investing in new technologies such as HiVision lorries will help us to attract the next generation of foresters and drivers into our business." Jamie Farquhar, National Manager for Scotland for forestry and wood trade body Confor, said: "This is a tremendous initiative, which is increasing driver safety as well as the efficiency of operations.

"The forestry and wood-using sector as a whole has really embraced technology in recent years. People from outside the industry are very surprised when they see the hi-tech nature of 21st century wood processing facilities, with highly advanced control rooms able to ensure that every log is analysed and used in the most appropriate way.

"We are also seeing the increasing use of virtual reality across the industry - not just with the HiVision lorries, but also in simulators to train people who are operating machines in the forest."

Mr Ritchie said he expected key players across the industry to invest in enhanced technology for lorries, with James Jones & Sons already considering expanding the fleet.

James Jones & Sons displayed the HiVision loglift lorries at APF 2018, the UK's largest forestry and wood show, attended by almost 20,000 people at the Ragley Estate, Warwickshire. David Leslie said: "The APF Show gave James Jones a great opportunity to show the forestry profession how we are investing in our harvesting operations and also gave visitors the opportunity to see the VR technology in action for themselves."

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