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## Processing Machines Fuel Firewood Businesses

### Multitek Firewood Processors Enable Solo Operator, Elderly Couple to Pursue Business

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Sometimes bigger may be better, but small can still be beautiful. Here are two stories of how the Multitek Model 2020LDCS series firewood processor, made by Wisconsin-based Multitek Inc., helps two small businesses survive and prosper in a way they could not without.

Wayne Malley, 58, of Duluth, Minn., operates a firewood business, Malley Firewood. He is the owner and sole employee. Wayne spent 20 years making firewood by hand with a chainsaw and an electric splitter he built.

About three years ago, paper mills began escalating the prices they would pay for round wood as they sought to obtain enough raw material. He was priced out of the market for logs. "I couldn't afford to buy wood and sell it at a profit," said Wayne.

Wayne began trucking in oak logs from about 100 miles away in Wisconsin. "At that time I was getting up in age," he recalled, "and knew I had to mechanize or get out of the business, for physically I wouldn't be able to handle it anymore."

Wayne did thorough research, checking out every firewood processor built in the U.S. and Canada, reading the specs and calling and talking to manufacturers on the phone. He was drawn to Multitek, located about 200 miles away. "I toured the plant," he said. "The guys there were super and showed me everything. I was really impressed by the fact that they use only top-of-the-line components."

Wayne decided to buy a Multitek 2020LDCS firewood processing machine. He drew on his 10 years of previous experience as a welder and metal fabricator to build a conveyor system to go with it.

Wayne produces about 1,500 logger's cords of firewood annually. The logger's



*Wood yard at Malley Firewood with Multitek firewood processor model 2020LDCS and plenty of firewood logs.*

cord — a stack of wood 4 feet wide, 4 feet high and 8 feet long — is the way he sells it. "I do mostly home deliveries in large quantities," he said. "It doesn't make much economic sense to drive around selling small quantities."

With the Multitek, Wayne produces about two cords per hour. "I don't care how powerful the machine is, you can't go faster than the splitter can split it without creating hazards."

Wayne buys logs 100 inches long. With the Multitek, he can buck them to any length. "There are a number of outdoor wood boilers that are popular here that require 2-foot lengths," he said. "There are a lot of small indoor decorative stoves that need 17 to 18 inches. If someone wants it customized to 15 inches, no problem."

The Multitek can split two, four, or six ways. "We don't go eight ways," said Wayne. "That's the kind of firewood you buy at a gas station, which is too small to be profitable for me."

The Multitek "is very steady and ex-

tremely reliable," Wayne reported. "There have been only the normal minor maintenance problems. And whenever I call Multitek, someone there helps me work through it right away."

Wayne produces about eight cords of wood per day and also makes deliveries. He prefers to work by himself. "I try to maintain the business myself," he said. "I'd rather not deal with employees."

When asked how many hours he puts into the business, he said, "I don't know of anybody in the nuts and bolts side of the lumber business who works a 40 hour week. For me it probably averages out to 60 hours a week winter and summer." In addition, his business occupies about 10 acres that must be plowed in the winter and maintained with gravel in the summer so that trucks can get in and out. Wayne tries to keep a stockpile of about 300 to 400 cords of firewood on hand.

Wayne started working as a construction welder in 1980. When that industry slowed down dramatically, he turned to



*Multitek firewood processor model 2020LDCS with deck full of logs that belongs to Lyle and Gerry Fechtelkotter.*

*Gerry, 79, occasionally operates the cab-equipped firewood processor.*

logging. He invested in about \$750,000 worth of logging equipment and hired employees. It was difficult to be profitable, however, and he did not like being in the position where mills could dictate the price for wood regardless of what it cost him. He later got out of logging completely.

In the firewood business, he found he could gradually increase prices to increase profits. “The beauty of firewood is that it’s recession proof,” said Wayne. “In tough times people try to save money by buying firewood.”

Wayne’s business serves customers in Duluth, a city of about 150,000 people, and outward in a diameter of about 30 miles. He is very service oriented and reliable, normally making deliveries within a day or so. He has little competition, according to Wayne.

The market for firewood is large, he believes, but Wayne is not interested in expanding his business. He wants to “coast into retirement,” he said. He invested in a 32-unit mini storage facility a year ago, and he plans to expand that business for retirement income.

Wayne and wife, Elizabeth, have been married 38 years; they have two sons and a daughter. They enjoy traveling in their motorhome, which allows Wayne to indulge in fishing and enjoying scenic forests.

In Poplar, Wisconsin, Lyle Fechtelkotter got into the firewood business about 20 years ago. At the time, he was a farmer and a logger, running logging crews of two to five men. During the oil embargo in the early 1980s, he decided to get into the firewood business, too. A few years later, he exited farming and logging. He could have lived off his retirement and in-

vestments, but he wanted to remain active so he maintained his firewood business. He still owns 300 acres of land that he uses either to grow hay or to rent to people needing pastureland for their horses.

Lyle started his firewood business with a chainsaw and splitting ax. About 13 years ago he bought a firewood processor from a company that later went out of business. “I didn’t know what I was doing when I got that first machine,” he confessed.

The machine performed well, but eventually Lyle needed to replace it. “The Multitek factory is just about 100 miles away, and every time the salespeople came by, they wanted to sell me one,” he said. “I always said, ‘Mine is good enough,’ and we would joke about it. But when it was time to buy a new one, I thought of them first because we had such a good rapport.”

By the time he needed to get a new firewood processor, Lyle already knew he wanted to buy a Multitek. He checked another manufacturer to compare prices, then decided there was no further need to shop around. He decided on a Multitek 2020LDCS and bought it early this year from a local dealer, Resource Recovery Systems.

Lyle and his wife, Geraldine, who goes by Gerry, are both 79. He has been in a wheelchair for about two years, so they hire college or high school students to run the Multitek. Gerry also runs the firewood processor occasionally. “There’s probably not another woman in the world who runs a firewood processor,” said Lyle.

“I enjoy it,” said Gerry. They bought a machine with the cab option, which has all the controls, heating and flood lights. “We

didn’t need the air conditioning for it never gets warmer than the low 80s, and you can just stick your head out the cab,” said Gerry.

Lyle used to work 16 to 18 hours per day. Although his physical activities are now restricted by the wheelchair, he can contribute to the business in other ways. For example, he handles phone calls and makes sales.

The business started off in a back muddy lot but began to do much better when they moved the operations to a site on Highway 2, which goes from Portland, Ore. to Portland, Maine. The location is visible from the highway. “We’re right off the highway and have a good view of Lake Superior,” said Gerry. “We wanted to build 20 piles of firewood 20 feet each but only got to 19.”

The business produces 300 to 500 logger’s cords of firewood annually. Firewood is sold year-round, to homeowners in winter and campers in the summer. The biggest customers are two Wisconsin state parks.

The Multitek firewood processor produces a logger’s cord of wood in about 1 to 1-1/2 hours. “The processor cuts from any length, from 20 down to 10 inches, and the splitter head turns out four, six, or eight pieces,” said Lyle. This Multitek model has the newest design and works really well.”

Although the couple has no particular interest in expanding the business, Lyle said, “The demand keeps increasing, and we’re having trouble keeping up with the demand.”

They could sell the business to their children — they have three children and seven grandchildren — or another buyer, but they have no plans to retire completely. “We enjoy life and want to stay active,” said Lyle. “We’ll work until we drop.”

Besides running their business, Lyle and Gerry are woodworking hobbyists. They make wood tables, rocking chairs, cabinets, and other furniture.

Gerry is the sister of Dick Bong, who was a highly decorated fighter pilot in World War II. Dick became America’s all-time ace of aces, downing 40 enemy planes as the pilot of a P-38 fighter plane who served in the Pacific theater. His many decorations included the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Dick returned home and continued his military service as a test pilot. He was killed test piloting the first Lockheed jet fighter plane on the same day that the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

There is a museum honoring him in Superior, Wis., the Richard I. Bong World War II Heritage Center, and the center has a Web site at [www.bongheritagecenter.org](http://www.bongheritagecenter.org).