



The 4-way wedge slides to evenly split different-diameter logs. In the up or down position, it acts as a 2-way splitter. Larry also keeps a 6-way wedge for larger logs.

ness centers around a Multitek 1610 firewood processor.

Before bringing the equipment to a job site, Larry looks it over and plans out its arrangement. “I usually require a 10 cord minimum, but if the location is nearby, I’ll set up for less,” he told me. When possible, he works in open areas. Once Larry and Vivianne arrive at a job site, it takes about 20 minutes to unload the tractor, set up the firewood processor, and start work. According to Larry, setting up the firewood processor itself takes about 10 minutes.

When I visited, he had the processor set up about five miles from his home. The live deck was loaded with a half dozen poles ranging from 3 inches to 8 inches in diameter. The conveyer was positioned to load the split wood onto the bed of the dump truck, and the tractor, fitted with a grapple loader, was waiting next to a large pile of oak, maple, and birch logs. Vivianne, a registered nurse, was working, so Larry ran the machine solo.

# Multitek 1610 FIREWOOD PROCESSOR

Anyone who has worked out in the woods or around a sawmill has probably given firewood more than a passing thought.

**L**arry and Vivianne Hanke of Cable, Wisconsin, first encountered a firewood processor at a public demonstration—and recognized the potential for a business. Although the Multitek factory is in nearby Prentice, Wisconsin, they looked at a number of other machines before buying the 1610 model. “I’m a mechanical engineer by trade, so I looked them over pretty closely,” Larry explained. “I looked at other units, and this one looked like it was the strongest. I haven’t dropped a big log on the

live deck yet, but one of these days I’m going to, and it looks like this will handle it.” As they envisioned their business, portability would be important. The outfeed conveyer and live deck both fold up for transport, keeping the 3,400-pound machine legal for towing.

In the past two years, Larry and Vivianne have put about 115 hours of processing time on the machine. Larry’s equipment now includes a four-wheel drive New Holland tractor, Ford F-450 with a dump bed, and a second truck and trailer to haul the tractor. But the busi-

## Running the 1610

The 1610 is a fully hydraulic machine, powered by a 25-hp Subaru Robin engine. With the engine warmed up and adjusted to 2,800 rpm, Larry pressed a hydraulic lever to roll the first pole off the live deck onto the conveyer and then went to work. The infeed conveyer is a steel chain with teeth that grip the poles as it moves them. Larry brought the pole forward until it touched a spring-loaded rod that serves as a length gauge. “I thought it would be better to have an automatic switch at first,” he said, “but with some of the gnarly wood I’ve had through here, this system works pretty well.”

## SPECS

### Multitek 1610 Firewood Processor

Production rate	..... 1 to 1.5 full cords per hour
Power plant	..... 25 hp Subaru
Max log diameter	..... 16 in.
Max log length	..... 10 ft.
Max firewood length	..... 24 in.
Splitting force	..... 18 tons
Splitting cycle time	..... 5.5 sec.
Cutterhead	..... hydraulic chain saw, 16-in. bar, 0.375-in.-pitch chain
Towing package	..... standard
Trailer hitch	..... 2-in. ball
Weight	..... 3,400 lbs.
Length	..... 19 ft. 3 in. (with conveyer)
Width	..... 6 ft.
Log feed	..... 2-strand live deck
Splitting wedge	..... 4-way/ 2-way
Infeed conveyer	..... steel with gripping teeth
Outfeed conveyer	..... 13 ft., max height 8 ft.
Options	..... live deck; 30-in. or 36-in. splitting chamber; 6-way wedge; Honda, Yanmar, or Kubota engine; 20-ft., 30-ft., or 35-ft. conveyer; 3-strand live deck, log winch, yard lights.

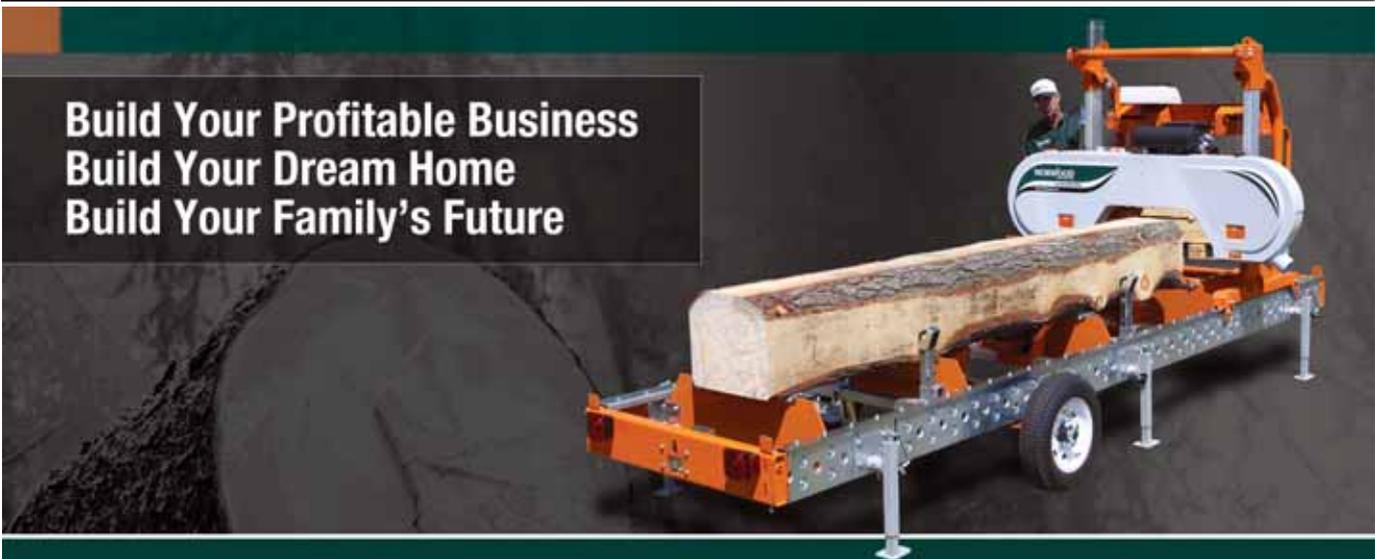


A view of the conveyer, clamp, and saw. The machine operated smoothly, and the only time Larry had to leave the operator's station was to help an occasional log off the live deck onto the conveyer.

“That’s a serious clamp,” he commented, as he pushed another lever forward to activate a hydraulic clamp that holds the wood for cutting. Larry likes the fact that the cutoff saw is a hydraulic-powered chain saw. One lever activates the saw blade and forces it down into the wood. The chain is turning only when it is being forced through the wood. The saw itself is standard 3/8-inch-pitch cutting chain on an 18-inch bar. While Larry always keeps a spare bar and

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a couple of chains handy, he seldom has to use them. “I can cut 20 cords without it getting dull,” he claims. Larry uses a biodegradable chain lube, so his customers can use the growing pile of sawdust as garden mulch. For those rare occasions when the saw doesn’t quite reach through a crooked 16-inch-maximum-diameter log, he keeps a small Stihl handy to finish the cuts.

As I donated blood to the local mosquitoes, Larry continued to demonstrate the machine. The splitter develops 18-1/2 tons with a 5.5-second cycle time. One of the high-end features of this firewood processor is the adjustable 4-way wedge. The operator can adjust it vertically to center on the wood. When moved all the way up or down, it splits the wood in half. For the bigger wood, Larry bolts in a 6-way wedge. Since it takes a few minutes to change wedges, he tries to keep the wood sorted by diameter. The design of the machine shows consideration for operator safety and comfort. The controls are offset from the saw blade. Wood chips and debris—and the chain, if it should break—are contained by a metal guard. The engine, along with its noise and fumes, is about 8 feet away from the operator.

### Crooked and Straight Poles

Crooked poles are a fact of life, and the usefulness of a firewood splitter depends on its ability to handle them without losing time. While he did have to help some of the more crooked logs onto the conveyer, the machine handled them with no problems. Every now and then, Larry had to reach into the splitting trough. “Sometimes you do need to straighten the logs after they’ve been split to get them onto the conveyer. Otherwise they can back up and cause the next piece to turn sideways and bind in the splitter.” He recalled one instance in which he had to take the wedge with the log tightly crushed into it out of the machine to free it up.



Larry Hanke uses his tractor with a grapple loader to set poles on the processor's live deck. According to Larry, the live deck arrangement works well for his operation, and has stood up well to having all sizes of logs dropped onto it.

“I cut about a cord an hour, if the logs are straight and between 9 inches and 16 inches in diameter,” Larry told me. “The small stuff really slows you down.” As he moved the truck, he explained, “The truck holds about a cord of wood, loosely stacked, and that’s how I estimate how much I’ve cut.” According to Larry, the machine works well with one person, but the process goes about half again as fast with two. Later, I spoke with Vivianne. “I do enjoy running the machine,” she told me. “It definitely runs more smoothly with two people working. There’s always something for a second person to do, like load the live deck, adjust the conveyer, clean out wood chips, and give the operator a break once in a while.” Setting up and breaking down also go a little faster with a second person.

### Selling the Service

The Hanks decided to take a somewhat unusual approach to their firewood business, modeling it after the portable sawmill idea. Instead of selling firewood, they sell the service of firewood processing. Customers are required to have the logs stacked and ready for cutting and splitting. Some have their firewood logs as a result of thinning operations in their own woodlot, but most have their logs delivered by loggers who are glad to have a



Vivianne Hanke runs the firewood processor while Larry tends to other tasks. Vivianne says the machine is easy to operate and that she enjoys running it. With the addition of a second person, Larry estimates that the operation runs half again as fast.

market for small or crooked logs that would otherwise remain in the woods. The 10 cord minimum most loggers place on these orders may sound like a lot of wood, but in the land of minus-30° nights and 70-inch annual snowfalls, many of his customers burn that much or more in a given winter.

“The first year was really slow,” Larry recalled. “Nobody knew what firewood processing was. I put an ad in the paper, and I’m in the phone book, and have a website, but it has really been word of mouth that has brought in the business.” This year is already looking better, with one job providing 30 cords of wood to a business that sells to campers. “And I need six cords a year for myself,” he added. In northern Wisconsin, the cutting season is somewhat limited. He says that the ground is too soft in April, and there is too much

snow from November through February. "I've worked when it was down to 10°," he told me, "and the engine works fine. You just have to give the hydraulics a little time to warm up."

Larry has to figure the price of fuel into his costs. "I go through about 12 gallons of gas to process 10 cords of wood, and probably go through another five gallons of Diesel to run the tractor and truck." He tries to keep his work within a 30 mile radius of his home.

As far as his satisfaction with the machine, Larry has found that it does exactly what he needs. "The more I look at other machines, the more I appreciate the Multitek." He continued, "I would like to see a pivoting conveyer, but it is pretty quick to hitch the processor to the tractor, pivot the whole machine around a little, then set it back down." He also noted that the conveyer is a little heavy to unfold. "It probably weighs about 80 pounds, and you have to be able to lift it."

Larry and Vivianne look forward to building the business. Previously, he had been an automation engineer for Seagate hard drives, traveling around the world setting up manufacturing facilities. He sums it up, "I sure would rather be doing this than making PowerPoint slides that are obsolete by the time I make a presentation!" The firewood business allows him to help landowners do thinnings and remove undesirable trees, provides a market for logging residue, and provides inexpensive firewood to his customers. Apparently others are considering following his lead. Whenever Larry gets a call from a "potential customer" who is more interested in the equipment than the firewood, he knows that they are more likely to be potential competitors. ■

*Dave Boyt has a BS degree in Forest Management and an MS in Wood Technology. He manages a tree farm (2006 Missouri Tree Farm of the Year), and operates a band saw sawmill.*

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