

Forestry Journal

REMOTE WORKING

Plotting a safe course

In 2019, remote lone worker monitoring system Trackplot marks 10 years of keeping people safe. Director Emma Thomas and business development manager Andrew Miller spoke to *Forestry Journal* about how the company has grown and how it is helping to improve safety in the forestry sector.



THE forestry industry is one of the UK's most dangerous sectors in which to work. This is especially true for the sector's lone remote workers.

Since its conception, monitoring system Trackplot has been offering these men and women an effective way to keep in touch and minimise the risk of working alone out in the wilderness.

Cert Riemersma, founder and technical director, developed the first iteration of the Trackplot portal – a web-based platform that helps workers keep in touch, wherever they are – as a project for a blue-chip client. Educated as a land surveyor with 15 years' experience working in the oil and gas industry, he knew the potential his product had to help keep people safe.

Then, at a networking event, he met the man who would become his business partner, a farmer from the Scottish Borders whose friend died of hypothermia after crashing his quad bike in the countryside and being unable to call for help.

"That's how it started," explained Trackplot's current director, Emma Thomas. "One director seeing the need and the other having the knowledge and capability to set this up. It unfortunately came about due to the fatality of a lone worker."

The company was incorporated in 2009 and the partners set out on a campaign to sell their tool to the agricultural sector. However, it was only after they branched off into forestry that the value of the technology began to be recognised.

Emma said: "Forestry is a sector that wants to have a better safety track record and, for that reason, health and safety is taken

quite seriously now. We've been working in forestry for a few years and are widening our customer base into estate management and land management."

Business development manager Andrew Miller said: "When you start talking to people in forestry, even if they haven't had a near miss themselves, they know someone who has, or they know of a death. That's why it's taken so seriously.

"We now cover every aspect of the forestry industry. We have clients who do transport, harvesters, a lot of big names like Tilhill and Egger. Forestry has really taken to it. It's good for those who are contracting and subcontracting. They know they're covered if everyone's on Trackplot."

There are two factors which make Trackplot ideally suited to the forestry sector, over and above its competitors, Emma and Andrew said. One of these relates to the nature of forestry work itself.

"For other lone workers like community nurses and doctors, the risk in their job typically comes from other people," said Emma. "These are people who are out working alone, but they're not remote. Whereas, with the workers we're looking after, it's the environment or the nature of the work itself that's the hazard. That requires a different approach."

While Trackplot can be used through a mobile

phone app, its satellite-based system offers a range of different communication methods and does not need mobile phone reception to work.

The system uses GPS and accurate Ordnance Survey mapping to find each lone worker's location, with coverage across the whole of the UK and beyond, including all remote areas.

It keeps authorised managers informed by notifications via email, text messaging and phone. Workers use a variety of methods to check in at regular intervals and check out at the end of the day. Once checked in, each lone worker is constantly monitored to ensure they are safe. If they're running late and overdue, they can advise they are okay. If they miss an agreed check-in time then action is taken to ensure they are found as soon as possible. If they get into difficulty, they can use Trackplot to call for assistance.

In an emergency, even in remote regions, a lone worker is able to raise an alert using the GPS device to rapidly locate their position.

The second key factor which sets Trackplot apart, said Andrew, is its flexibility. Through working with forestry and estates, the company has developed its technology to better meet the needs of lone workers. For example, the portal now allows managers to group employees based on activity and cater notification periods to staff working hours.

"We know the industry from the bottom up," he said. "We know what the users want and



Emma Thomas, director



Trackplot is designed for people who work outdoors. It allows people who work alone to keep in touch wherever they are.

Different methods to check in and check out include GPS device, landline, text message, computer, laptop or tablet using the Trackplot Portal or mobile app (available on Android and iPhone). The mobile app complements the GPS device as it can be used when lone workers have mobile phone reception.

“Working with Trackplot, we have been able to set the system up to meet our needs and those of our workers. The system has brought us greater security when working alone in remote places.”

**Kirsty Adams,
head of safety and assurance, Tilhill Forestry**

we can make adjustments so it covers HSE and all the manager’s wishes, but isn’t too intrusive.

“When you talk to forestry workers one of the first things they’ll say to you is they don’t want to be monitored, but that’s entirely up to them. There are many ways to check in and stay safe without being constantly tracked.

“We listen to feedback and continually develop Trackplot so we can offer more options. We can add an ‘arrive site/leave site’ button, which is good for harvesting managers. They can also mark a badger set or if a bird of prey’s in the area, which can be quite beneficial. Foremost it’s a safety device, but we’re making it work for each and every customer. We’ve taken that feedback from the boots on the ground.

“It’s always easier to get a safety device into someone’s hands if you’ve spoken to the person on the ground. We’ve had a lot of success through that approach.”

A member of FISA, Confor and the FCA, the company is committed to improving safety across the industry, developing its technology in ways that allow it to be applied in new areas, providing protection to a wider variety of lone workers.

“We’re continuing to expand our client base with more remote and lone workers coming on board in different sectors, using their feedback to update and improve our system,” said Emma. “We’ve seen for a while now that the big companies are really working hard to get their health and safety watertight. But then when you start to have conversations further down the chain, talking to

smaller businesses and contractors, that’s when it becomes more tricky. That’s something we want to work more on, to improve this culture of responsibility throughout the industry, not just with the big players at the top.

“Quite often, it’s a worker’s partner who says it would save them a lot of worry if they had Trackplot and that wins them over. We have quite a lot of conversations like that when we’re exhibiting at the APF

and forestry workers come along with their families.

“Then there are people who get in touch prompted by a bad experience they’ve had. It happens more often than we’d like.”

Now that it’s established and growing as it enters its second decade, the company is becoming exposed to a wider variety of business within forestry that need its services. “What we do and how we do it is always expanding,” said Emma. “We started off with forestry management and harvesting. Now we’re getting into timber transport, all sorts of different types of workers within different companies. It’s going right across the industry supply chain. We’re seeing a broadening of our scope.”

One timber company in the Scottish Highlands has even added its office cleaner to the app, Emma said, recognising that while she may not be chopping trees out in the forest, as a lone worker in a timber yard, if she suffered an accident during the night, no-one would know till the morning.

This all begs the question of how often Trackplot is being used in emergencies.

“We’ll get a call for assistance two or three times a month and, in the winter, maybe more,” said Andrew. “The important thing is everything’s kept in-house. Someone can respond much faster if they know the land, rather than putting it out of house and having to explain to someone how to get off the grid and into the forest and so on. So the ‘assist’ button is used pretty frequently, where people have flat tyres, run out of diesel, get stuck in a ditch, take your pick.”

Use of the ‘SOS’ button will immediately alert the emergency services and in 10 years, Trackplot is pleased to say it has never received an SOS, though by rights, Andrew said, it should have.

“We had a timber truck driver who tipped the lorry, broke both his shoulders, managed to crawl out the vehicle, but decided not to press ‘SOS’, just to press ‘assist’ instead,” he said. “Because he wasn’t actually dying, he didn’t deem it a medical emergency.”



Andrew Miller, business development manager



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