



BC's Risky Back Roads

No standards, murky oversight, can make them deadly.

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There are no standards for forest road construction, which came as a surprise to Forest Safety Ombudsman Roger Harris.

He'd been following testimony at a coroner's inquest into the death of a 52-year-old logging truck driver, Joseph F. Leroux, who crashed and bled to death on a resource road 190 kilometres north of Prince George in March 2006. During the inquest a Ministry of Forest representative revealed there are virtually no provincial standards for road construction, inspection or posting of signs.

Since Harris was appointed ombudsman by the Forest Safety Council in 2006, he's discovered a host of issues that put backwoods workers at risk. He's written [a report on lack of training and coming labour shortages](#), but now he's turned his focus onto resource road safety issues.

Harris, who has worked in the logging industry for much of his life and was BC Liberal MLA for the resource-dependent Skeena region in northern B.C. from 2001 to 2005, says he still knows too little about how the roads winding around the nooks and crannies of British Columbia are managed.

If someone in his position is confused, how about others?

What does this mean for the hundreds of people -- from loggers to nature seekers -- who use the province's 650,000 kilometres of resource roads?

And just who is in charge of keeping these road safe?

Ministry of Forests opts out

Leroux was one of five forestry truckers killed in northern B.C. in 2006. Thirty have died in the province since 1995. The inquest into his death, the first to be held in northern B.C., wrapped up in the afternoon on June 27 after seven days of testimony. The five-member jury deemed the death accidental and issued several recommendations.

As heard throughout the inquest, the reasons for Leroux's death cannot be attributed solely to poor road conditions. The winter roads hadn't been plowed to the width of the summer roads, but radio calling protocols were also unclear. The driver who Leroux met on that fateful day was unaware another vehicle was nearby, and cannabis was found in Leroux's system as well.

The [purpose of coroner's inquest](#) was not to lay blame, but instead make recommendations to several bodies, including BC Timber Sales (an arm of the Ministry of Forests), WorkSafe BC, the BC Forest Safety Council and ICBC, which may help prevent similar accidents from occurring.

Ron Corbeil, Health and Safety director of the United Steelworkers Association, attended the inquest and was surprised by the Ministry of Forests' refusal to take ownership of resource roads.

He pointed to work done by the [Forest Safety Taskforce in 2003](#), making it clear that an understanding of who is responsible for the workplace was essential.

Logging roads, however, are managed through bureaucratic layers of permits often invisible to drivers.

Confused authority

Tom Jackson, a BC Timber Sales safety officer who also sits on the BC Forest Safety Council, says the road permitting system is very complex and depends on the nature of the road and the use.

Simply put, the Ministry of Forests oversees resource roads on Crown land, which have two designations: Permit roads and Forest Service roads. Private roads are another matter.

Through the permit system, major licensees are often designated as primary road users, which, according to the Ministry of Forests, passes ownership responsibilities, (such as maintenance and road use rules), onto the permit holder.

The situation gets even more complicated when more than one user is permitted access to B.C.'s back roads. In some cases, as was the situation on the Finlay-Philip Forest Service Road where Leroux hit a snowbank, careened into a ditch and died, two logging companies held permits on the road: Canfor and Abitibi.

According to testimony at the inquest, neither company was clear who the primary permit holder was. Regardless, the Ministry of Forests does not inspect the maintenance or examine the road rules worked out by companies.

"We're not privy to that," said Knut Herzog, a road engineer from the Mackenzie Forest District, responding to questions from Andy Orr, the coroner's lawyer.

Report flagged confusion

Corbeil is well aware that many users can complicate who is responsible for resource roads in B.C. But he believes the government is slow to act. "I was surprised at how dug in the Ministry of Forests is," he said.

Determining who "owns" the road is essential because the Worker's Compensation Act places responsibility for workplace related safety on the owners of a job site.

In January 2006, WorkSafe BC carried out an inspection on the Finlay–Philip road, two months before the deadly accident occurred. The report, submitted as evidence at the inquest, identified confusion among the licensees about who was the prime contractor on the road. The report determined that with no prime contractor in place, the province was the owner of the roads, and responsibility to coordinate safety fell to the Ministry of Forests.

From the Forest Service's point of view, says Jackson, the issue of road ownership and how that relates to the wording in the Workers Compensation Act is not settled.

Not just for logging

When it's not clear who is responsible for a resource road, it can make things difficult for anyone who relies on the route for transportation.

Jack Talstra, mayor of Terrace, points to a resource road known as the Cranberry Connector. The road, which runs for a mere 50 kilometres, from a turnoff along Highway 37 until it turns into the well-maintained Nisga'a Highway, is a mess of potholes, one-way bridges and erosion.

But it is also the only way to get to Terrace from places east when Highway 16 is blocked, as it was for several days in late May and early June.

First a massive landslide 10 metres high and 66 metres wide covered the road on May 28, then water levels on the Skeena River raised and flooded the road, both east and west of the city.

Cut off, the city of Terrace and Kitimat, to the south, both faced a supply crisis.

Talstra says the Cranberry Connector was always well-maintained when there were forestry operations on the road, but now no company or provincial arm is responsible. The road is so bad that even though this was the only route available to transport trucks and other drivers, the Ministry of Transportation could not recommend it as a detour at the outset of the disaster.

Not only is the road necessary for safety, but it makes an excellent circle route for tourists coming down Highway 37 from the Yukon Territory. Talstra says many of these visitors miss the beautiful Nass Valley, lava beds and Terrace as well, because they turn east at Kitwanga and

continue along their way. He wants to see the road recognized for its emergency service usage and upgraded to a secondary highway under the domain of the Ministry of Transportation.

First Nations rely on back roads

MaryAnne Arcand from Forest TruckSafe BC, an initiative of the BC Forest Safety Council, says jurisdiction over resource roads is also an issue for 25 First Nations in B.C., whose isolated villages are as far as 200 kilometres up a logging road from the nearest town.

Last winter, people in Takla, a community north of Stewart Lake, were cut off for 10 days when early snows covered the road and no one assumed responsibility for clearing it.

TruckSafe BC held a summit in 2006 to discuss these issues with First Nations communities and out of that came several recommendations, including one calling on the government to look at forestry roads leading to First Nations communities differently and to take responsibility for maintaining them.

As for the public, Arcand is concerned that many people don't know what they are getting into when they travel on logging roads. She just received a complaint from an oil company employee who was working on a back road near Tumbler Ridge. He said he'd helped five sets of tourists change their tires in the past few days and wanted to know who to talk to about getting the road fixed up.

Apparently, she says, a set of waterfalls along the road are being promoted as a must-see site in the area, yet RV drivers and others are not warned about the road conditions before they set out.

She was forced to call him back and say unless there is a permit holder on the road, no one is in charge.

Public beware

Arcand has heard of travelers with three flat tires in a 20 kilometre stretch. Cell phones don't work in most remote areas.

In urban areas one in 625 car crashes results in fatalities, whereas in rural areas, the risk increases to one in 25. That's because of lack of access to emergency services.

"It could be hours before someone comes along," she says.

This brings her back to the Leroux inquest. Private motorists are involved in 84 per cent of the collisions with logging truck drivers. Although only logging trucks were on the road at the time of Leroux's death, the inquest raised many of the issues the BC Forest Safety Council has been working on for a couple of years.

She says the inquest concluded government needs to take more responsibility over how roads are managed.

Worker health and safety, as well as road user safety, should be included in all forestry plans and the government needs to find a way to enforce this.

She thinks the jury did an incredible job of synthesizing an enormous amount of material during the inquest and their recommendations will help maintain the momentum for change that has been underway in the past couple of years.

"But given the death, it has not been fast enough," she says.

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Heather Ramsay, a journalist based in Queen Charlotte City, is a contributing editor to The Tyee. Read more of her stories about northern B.C. [here](#).