

## **FOCUS ON SAFETY: Safety is a powerful tool for worker retention**

*by John Betts*

On top of supporting day-to-day forestry, silviculture in BC needs to restore millions of hectares ravaged by the mountain pine beetle and woodland fires. While meeting the demand - planting 265 million seedlings in 2006 alone - the BC silviculture industry also improved injury rates in recent years. Key issues affecting our performance, and some potential threats to sustaining it, can be seen in new research that may be useful elsewhere in Canada's silviculture industry.

Released in February, the report entitled Health and Safety in the Tree Planting Industry documents major changes in our workforce, and cites how on-the-job safety influences our recruitment and retention capabilities. Conducted last year, this study surveyed 833 workers across BC and compared the results to similar 2004 research. The full 60-page report can be viewed at [www.wsca.ca](http://www.wsca.ca).

Researchers tracked how tree planters assessed their own safety behaviour and that of co-workers and supervisors. Despite less experience and more youth in the industry, the study found generally safer behaviour, although some unsafe conditions continued. In 2004 and 2006, for instance, only half the planters would stop work because of a toxic hazard and only 43% would report a supervisor for speeding.

Overall, however, the survey indicates declining risk tolerance in a workforce with an average age of about 25 years. By itself, this finding may seem counter-intuitive with this age group, but other results show a higher safety profile for supervisors and an association between supervision and planters' safe behaviour.

The bad news is that only 20.8% of last year's workers saw silviculture as a career, compared to 25.5% in 2004. Reinforcing this trend is the 2006 finding that only 23% intended to return to tree planting in 2007. This is potentially devastating to silviculture because veteran planters are twice as productive as newcomers, and relying on rookies ratchets up demands on supervisors.

The research also leaves no doubt that occupational health and safety is a powerful tool to help us retain experienced workers. The tree planters themselves made this clear in their survey responses:

- Wages are important, but so are jobs with contractors demonstrating good organization and competence, which definitely includes safety.
- Workers need and want good supervisors; they are the main reason for the study's good news.

Acting on this information is crucial - for tree planting and other silvicultural treatments that rely on experienced tree planters in the off season.

When it comes to safety, more is needed than the three Es of engineering, education, and enforcement in promoting safety. This is literally a survival issue, for both workers and the industry. We must build and sustain a deeply rooted culture of safety, for everyone's sake.

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