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Deaths in timber harvesting down in 2007, says safety council Overall number of deaths in industry rises from 2006

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A dramatic drop in deaths and injuries in timber harvesting between 2005 and 2006 has cut the cost of accident claims by 39 per cent, according to the B.C. Forest Safety Council.

Total claims for timber harvesting dropped by 21 per cent over 2005, when 43 workers died in the entire forest sector, including sawmills and log hauling, prompting the government to appoint a special coroner to investigate forestry deaths.

The statistics released Wednesday do not include log hauling or sawmilling. Both of those sectors posted increases, council president Tanner Elton said in an interview.

"Log hauling is a problematic area and it has to be a major focus going forward," he said.

He said that harvesting was used as a benchmark because it is the largest sector and the focus of the safety council's efforts. The council attributes the 2006 drop to a renewed approach to safety by companies and to certification and training programs.

He said the indicators have continued into 2007.

"The denominator is dollars," he said of the statistics, prepared by WorkSafeBC, "but what we are really measuring here is injuries. There is no banner up saying 'Mission Accomplished.' What we are saying is that we are making progress."

The number of fatalities overall climbed in 2007 over 2006. The safety council posted a notice of the 14th industry death this year - two more than in 2006 - at the same time it released the report.

But Elton also said there has not been a faller fatality for 18 months, which is unprecedented for the B.C. industry. The job of cutting down trees is the most hazardous in the forest industry.

"We have asked this industry to do a lot of things. We have asked them to fundamentally change the way they practise safety. We have asked them all to make investments. Let's make sure it is sustainable and let's make sure it continues."

The United Steelworkers, which is striking coastal forest companies over working conditions, said the statistics are too much of a snapshot to show a trend.

"Statistics tend to go up and down," said Ron Corbeil, health and safety representative for the union, who is on the safety council. "We haven't got to where we want to be as far as changing the culture where health and safety is truly the priority of all workers. It has to start at the top."

The union links 2005's record to shift changes and hours that were part of a sector-wide restructuring. The fatality record for 2007 is on par with that of 2004, he said, before the safety initiative began.

"Before I truly believe companies are making health and safety an overriding priority, when things like hours of work and shifting are being contemplated, health and safety has to be looked at."

Forest companies maintain the statistics show there is no evidence that the changes have affected safety.

Corbeil said the narrow spectrum of statistics released Wednesday do not counter numerous studies on workplace safety that show a relationship between hours of work and safety, he said.

Elton said the statistics were released to coincide with National Forest Week, which runs from Sept. 23 to Sept. 29.

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