

Forest safety program sets 18-month target

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The B.C. Forest Safety Council said Wednesday it hopes to capture most of the estimated 4,000 companies involved in the logging sector, and thousands more owner operators, in its safety certification program within 18 months.

Safety council executive director Tanner Elton was in Prince George Wednesday to meet with forest companies, including Canfor Corp., to discuss how the program, called SAFE (Safety Accord Forestry Enterprise) Companies, will unfold.

The program -- which 10 major companies have already said they will sign onto, including Canfor, West Fraser, Pope & Talbot and Tembec -- is one of the key planks in the industry-led safety council's efforts to permanently reduce the high number of serious injuries and fatalities in the forest sector.

The logging sector has the highest industry death rate in B.C.

"If we're going to take the whole industry there in 18 months, it's going to take a whole lot of work and commitment, so we're offering a lot of assistance," said Elton.

Canfor Corp. officials couldn't be reached for comment.

While the safety certification is voluntary, the support of major forest companies, as well as from B.C. Forests Minister Rich Coleman, has boosted the prospect of further buy-in.

Forest companies are expected to insist that contractors that want to work for them have the certification. Coleman has said that companies will also need to be certified to bid on short-term Crown timber logging rights through B.C. Timber Sales.

The Crown agency will also become safety certified, said Elton.

He said that should cover 80 to 90 per cent of the logging sector, which includes log hauling. "The way it's been set up, boy, if you don't get your safe company certification, you're going to have a hard time staying in business," stressed Elton.

Once companies register for the safety certification, which can be done beginning Nov. 1, they have six months to implement safety programs.

Areas that the safety certification will address include: company safety policies and leadership; hazard and risk management; training; health and safety communication systems; and incident investigation and reporting.

Companies must pass a safety audit if they have 20 or more employees.

There are also requirements for companies with less than 20 employees, including participating in a training course and submitting documentation on areas like worker training, inspection reports and incident investigations

Very small companies, one-to-two-person operations, will have less onerous requirements to become certified.

The industry and the provincial government have put a bigger focus on safety after 43 workers were killed in the forest sector in 2005, more than twice the number the year before.

In northern B.C., logging truck crashes lead the death toll, as they have for a decade. Since 1995, there have been at least 28 logging truck fatal crashes in northern B.C., most of those taking place 250 kilometres north, south and west of Prince George.

While the safety certification program is meant to improve worker safety, it should also help companies' bottom lines, said Elton.

On average, for every \$100 of payroll, companies working in the harvesting sector are paying out \$10 in WorkSafe B.C. premiums. Some companies are paying a premium as high as \$18. In Alberta, the average premium in the forest sector is \$5.

Elton said within three years, he believes the average premium can be reduced significantly.

A safer industry will also help attract new workers and help to retain existing workers and lengthen their stay in the business, added Elton.

Central Interior Logging Association manager Roy Nagel said there's some trepidation from logging contractors but support as well. "It's going to be a pile of work," noted Nagel.

But he said the logging companies see its advantages in creating a safer work environment, and positioning them to be eligible to work for forest companies that insist on certification, as well as allowing them to bid on B.C. Timber Sales wood.

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