

A new reality in B.C.'s forests — SAFE Companies

By Tanner Elton, Chief Executive Officer of the BC Forest Safety Council

This fall, the BC Forest Safety Council began accepting registrations for its SAFE Companies program. "SAFE" stands for Safety Accord Forestry Enterprise, and this is the most ambitious, comprehensive safety initiative ever undertaken by our industry. Ultimately, it will fundamentally change how British Columbia's largest industry views and practices safety.

The SAFE Companies launch is a clear signal that the forest sector is shouldering responsibility for worker safety in all of its forestry operations.

Implementing this program is an enormous task, given our target of having the entire industry — more than 5,000 forestry companies — engaged by the end of 2007. Joining them will be government agencies such as BC Timber Sales.

The SAFE Companies goal is straight-forward. Every forestry operation will put in place all required safety programs and procedures, and demonstrate through an annual audit, that they are in place and working. Further, by adopting the Forest Safety Accord, companies agree to make safety an over-riding priority and to participate in sector-wide safety initiatives.

This direct and simple approach means significant challenges.

As an industry, we must track and register companies, conduct and verify audits, develop sector-wide standards and guidelines, and much more. This requires significant and enduring effort by everyone — from the worker in the bush to the CEO in the boardroom. And, yes, it will require financial resources and time.

Can we afford to do it? In fact, we can't afford not to. Our current unsafe performance not only traumatizes workers and their families and disrupts individual companies, it burdens the entire industry with major, unnecessary costs that sap our competitiveness.

Protecting our workers and making our companies safer, is more than worth all the effort and money. The pay-off will be a healthier industry with far fewer injuries and fatalities — and higher morale, greater productivity and a new positive image.

The dramatic results will not take long. Within the next five years, we will transform our poor safety performance from a painful and expensive embarrassment into a tangible point of pride.

B.C.'s forestry sector will be the world's most innovative and resilient, and it will maintain the best safety record. In our industry, "unsafe is unacceptable" will be the new reality.