

A SAFE investment

Achieving SAFE certification in British Columbia represents an investment in time and money—but the results are worth it, with the goal being a safer workplace with reduced injuries and accidents.

By Jim Stirling

It all depends on where you are when you start the journey. For forest companies with a functioning safety program in place, the process toward achieving SAFE certification in British Columbia represents an investment in time and money—but it's do-able. For those companies with little or no program in place, the SAFE goal represents a daunting challenge.

That summary appears to be the consensus from a couple of small and mid-size companies that are among the first to have achieved SAFE company status. But the clock is ticking for all sizes of companies and contractors working in the BC bush. SAFE certification will become a qualification for work. According to the BC Forest Safety Council (BCFSC), many forestry employers in the sector have committed to having only SAFE certified companies working in their operations by the end of 2007.

The SAFE acronym stands for Safety Accord Forestry Enterprise. It was introduced by the BCFSC working with WorkSafe BC and the forest industry. The SAFE certification program is part of a comprehensive and co-operative strategy dedicated to eliminating the deaths and injuries traditionally incurred by the forestry sector.

Lo-Bar Log Transport Co, Ltd, based in Prince George, had an advantage compared with many companies because prior to 2005 it operated in Alberta. As the name suggests, Lo-Bar started off as a trucking company—that was about 30 years ago—before the family-owned operation moved into full phase log contracting in 1988. The SAFE certification program is made-in-BC but modeled broadly on an Alberta program that started in 1999/2000.

"We'd been through that four separate times and that gave us a leg-up," says Gary Jacob, Lo-Bar's owner. The safety culture was well established within the company's operations and its approximately 30 regular employees. "We had systems up and running although this did involve a few different approaches. The greatest advantage we had was that the idea was not unknown. People worry about the unknown," notes Jacob.



The most recently appointed BC Forest Safety Council safety advocates: (standing, left to right) Carey White, Cal Hill and Bob Lamond. In front is Dave Mullet. The four advocates have nearly 110 years' combined experience in the forest industry.

Lo-Bar is a logging contractor for Canadian Forest Products Ltd, harvesting around 200,000 cubic metres annually and operating about two dozen pieces of equipment. Canfor is keen to develop a leadership role in the adoption of the SAFE certification program and is encouraging its contractors to do what they have to do to achieve certification sooner rather than later. Canfor's woodlands divisions in Prince George and Fort Nelson were among the first operations to become SAFE certified.

The core of a safety program is the establishment of a safety manual outlining its protocols and training procedures, says Jacob. "It lays out what you're going to do for your workers and the public." Upon that framework are built safety systems. "That means you do what the safety manual says you're going to do," Jacob says he doesn't subscribe to the notion of simply giving everyone a copy of the safety manual to carry around in their machines or trucks. "I prefer to train, have regular updates and safety meetings."

The auditing process is both thorough and diligent about record keeping, adds Jacob. The company can't just say it held a safety meeting. They need to be able to prove it if required, by producing properly prepared minutes, for example.

"Certainly there are costs involved in this," says Jacob. How great they are will, again, depend on what companies were doing safety-wise to begin with. "But it's really an investment in lowering injury and accident costs and building a safer, happier workforce."

The independent auditors are BCFSC trained in all aspects of the auditing process. "There's one thing about the auditing process, and that is there's no bluffing your way through it," continues Jacob. "They ask a multitude of questions and interview employees." Lo-Bar can now self-audit for two years with an independent audit every third year, says Jacob.

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A further inducement to pursue SAFE certification is that successful companies are eligible for a five per cent reduction in WorkSafe premiums.

But there remains considerable anecdotal confusion about SAFE and what it means on an operational level. And there remain grey areas to clarify in a program that's in its infancy. One source of confusion is that there are different programs and requirements depending on the size of the operation. Another surrounds the applicability of a SAFE accreditation.

"When you're a SAFE company, you've got something that's all encompassing," points out Jacob. While individual licensees

and the Ministry of Forests and Range have safety standards and issues that must be accommodated, a SAFE company can qualify for work with different licensees and bid for wood under the BC Timber Sales Program, he says.

Westpine Contractors Ltd, is a smaller log contracting company with a regular work force of about 15 people. The Quesnel-based company is a long time contractor for West Fraser Mills and it, too, was prepared for the changes that SAFE accreditation demands.

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"Not that it was easy," says Kelly King, Westpine's owner. "It was far from easy." But like Lo-Bar, Westpine had done its safety program homework. And it did no harm that King is a director of the Central Interior Logging Association and as such had a heads-up about what was coming down the pipeline and could get prepared to meet SAFE's requirements.

It was additionally useful that Westpine had established items like standard operating procedures for log harvesting equipment years ago. And West Fraser has monthly meetings with its contractors which help in keeping up with and adjusting to safety concerns.

"There's lots of paperwork involved," confirms Kelly. And the company has to be able to prove it's doing what the safety program requires, he adds. Part

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of that includes maintaining a detailed daily journal. Westpine hired a full-time mechanic whose duties include maintaining a log book on each piece of equipment and its operation. "You pretty much need someone to supervise," he says. "There are so many little things."

King, his foreman and the company secretary took a two-day course, at Westpine's expense, to do its own internal audit. When produced, the company had it double-checked by a certified BCFSC auditor before submitting it for SAFE approval.

Becoming a SAFE certified company has made Westpine's crews more aware of safety and reinforced the need to be diligent at all times, says King. "And if SAFE helps save one life, then it's worth it," he adds, putting the program in its true perspective.

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