

Stakeholder SAFETY

British Columbia's first Forest Safety Ombudsman is taking the practical approach of being a facilitator on safety issues—but he has not been shy about pointing out industry shortcomings that impact worker safety.

By Jim Stirling

In March 2007, Roger Harris reached the half way point juncture of his two-year appointment as British Columbia's first Forest Safety Ombudsman. It's been quite the ride and a busy time for Harris. And he's not been shy about pointing out industry shortcomings that impact worker safety.

That's not surprising. Harris has paid his dues and then some in the forest industry. He began his industry career in a forestry camp on the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1972. He migrated through positions as a union rep, a phase logging contractor, a supervisor with a major licensee, the Liberal MLA for Skeena and on to become Minister of State for Forestry.

And if there's anything that background and a year on the job has revealed, it's that the BC Forest Safety Council made a shrewd move creating the ombudsman's position.

"I think the office itself will continue to evolve and that there's a demonstrated need for it," declares Harris. "Wherever I go, people very much want to participate; they're very concerned about safety issues," he expounds, and that includes licensees, logging contractors and phase loggers. "There's been a fundamental change in the business community on health and safety at work."

Okay. But what exactly is a safety ombudsman and why do we need one? Harris has devoted considerable time travelling the province expounding on answers to those questions. And in the process, he has helped define the role the ombudsman's office can contribute.

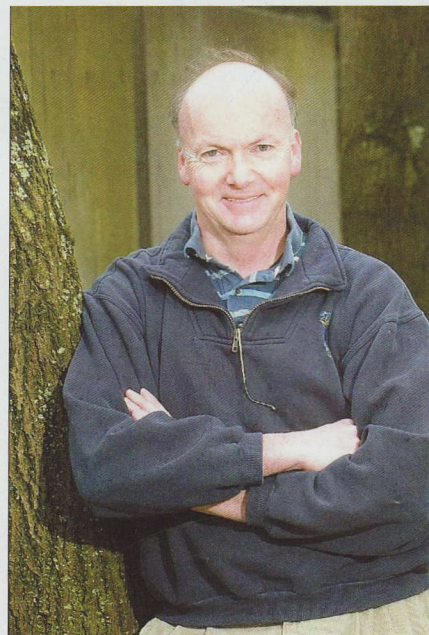
Impacting safety on a complex and dynamic forest industry requires free and open discussion among all parties involved. For an owner-operator, for example, to speak out about a perceived safety problem has in the past courted the risk of being penalized through work restrictions or sanctions for his trouble. The ombudsman's office provides a mechanism for addressing such reprisals, says Harris.

"It provides confidentiality and impartiality," he adds and it's available to all. (Interestingly, Harris relates, the first issue brought to the safety ombudsman's office wasn't from a disgruntled logging contractor or sub but from a licensee who'd encountered a road and cutting permit issue with the Ministry of Forests.) "The word ombudsman compels an answer, a fix-it," explains Harris. His office has no legislative or regulatory authority.

But that's not an issue for Harris. "A legislative approach ends up with lawyers talking to lawyers. We have an industry that needs to work at trying to talk with each other," he adds tellingly. "We can work better as a facilitator."

Harris's office undertook a comprehensive examination of training and certification in the forest industry and its implications on safety performance. It resulted in a startling report made public in January, 2007. It predicts labour shortages—combined with curtailment of company-led training—are heightening safety risks. Standardized, province-wide training programs are close to non-existent.

The Harris report called upon the BC



Roger Harris, BC Forest Safety Ombudsman: "We have an industry that needs to work at trying to talk with each other."

government to support forest industry training financially so the industry can recruit and retain the people it requires to function. The government needs to invest in secondary and post-secondary education, he says. "And we need to get there rather quickly." The forest industry suffers from an image problem when it comes to attracting and retaining the people it needs.

Other industries have a presence in schools but forestry is poorly represented,

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April 26-28, 2007
BC Saw Filers Conference & Trade Show
 Penticton, BC
 604.585.4012
 www.bcsawfilers.com

May 10-12, 2007
Northern Alberta Forestry Show
Grande Prairie, AB
 780.532.3279
 www.evergreenpark.ca

May 30-June 1, 2007
Maritime Lumber Bureau Annual Meeting & Convention
Charlottetown, PEI
 902.667.3889
 www.mlb.ca

June 20-23, 2007
Transportation & Marketing of Wood Products Conference
Whistler, BC
 604.669.7996, ext.101
 www.wtmc.ca

if at all. Companies are reluctant to invest in training programs because it's expensive, there are liability issues and because when trained, there's a chance the employee will jump ship to a higher-paying job in another industry. That's often the oil patch.

Harris says economic and competitive pressures all impact safety. So does continuity of work. The industry's inability to guarantee a predictable season for loggers makes recruiting people more difficult. And, he says, there's more stress than in the past because of all the changes that have taken place within the industry. "The industry's not as much fun as it used to be and we need to pay attention to that," observes Harris.

"Now, it's not the unskilled workers that are required. Now, new regulations and techniques mean the job entry positions are gone," says the safety ombudsman. "The industry has been living off the fat of the land of skilled people and that ran out a couple of years ago." Harris says the situation has degenerated to the point where some logging contractors in BC aren't taking on work because they don't have the people they need to perform it. Their equipment sits parked instead.

Harris indicates the "meat-in-the-seat" syndrome is scary, safety-wise. All a potential logging truck driver needs is a Class 1 licence. Then he/she can climb behind the wheel of a truck hauling loaded trailers of different configurations across the most demanding terrain and driving conditions in the province. "We need an endorsement system of some kind, industry-driven."

The BC Forest Safety Council has been successful with its faller training certification program. It costs about \$10,000 and takes 30 days, although not everyone learns at the same speed, notes Harris. He says certification standards for other forest industry jobs in the woods is a starting point for the labour shortage challenges, with the government picking up the funding help in initial expensive training. "We need to do it right and we have to offer it around BC."

Harris also offered another couple of ideas to fill skilled labour shortages in the forest industry. "We should be able to help injured workers re-train, there's an opportunity there," he suggests. "And there are older workers who can and should be retrained and retained longer in the work force," he recommends.



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