

# Aiming higher

*By Susan Main*

Island logging company, Alternative Forest Operations, renews its commitment to falling certification standards.



“We studied the paperwork, we did what we needed to do to pass certification, and then we went back to business as usual – and that’s really one of the reasons we later failed our WorkSafeBC audit.”

AFO renewed its commitment to the certification standard and now uses it as a baseline for falling safety. Supervisors ensure the standard is upheld by documenting their weekly safety audits and noting areas for improvement among the 25 crew and contractors. They follow up and if they see mistakes repeated, the supervisors pair the erring fallers with mentors who show them how to work more safely.

AFO is registered in the B.C. Forest Safety Council’s Safety Accord Forestry Enterprise (SAFE) Companies program, in which participating forest companies are certified as exceeding all required safety programs and committed to making safety an overriding priority. Participating companies, including large and medium-sized firms, smaller owner-operator companies, and individual contract fallers, benefit from rebates to their WorkSafeBC assessments in addition to reduced injuries and lost time. The certification also gives companies a competitive boost during bid tendering. As of April 2007, more than 1,000 companies had voluntarily applied for this certification.

WorkSafeBC safety officer Chris Warburton returned to AFO a year after the initial inspection and found major improvements.

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Last year, business came to a halt for three days after WorkSafeBC inspected AFO’s hand falling operations and found poor falling practices, lack of supervision, and no evidence of a safety program. The Occupational Health and Safety Regulation requires supervisors to check fallers’ stumps weekly and keep written records of the inspections, but AFO was not keeping these records so had none to show. The owners met with WorkSafeBC and talked about how to turn things around immediately to avoid becoming the next industry statistic.

“We really had to put our whole business under the magnifying glass and look at what was missing,” says the senior Kemmler. “We had a safety program in place – had all the documents – but we didn’t follow through.”

Kemmler says the fallers acknowledged they had not been honouring the safety standards they agreed to when signing their certification from the B.C. Forest Safety Council.

“We just weren’t living up to the certification standard,” says Kemmler, who drew on his 25 years of experience to challenge and pass the faller certification exam.

In 2006, WorkSafeBC inspected more than 300 logging companies in an effort to stop unsafe falling practices. One of these companies was Alternative Forest Operations (AFO), based in Crofton, on Vancouver Island.

AFO is a heli-logging company formed in 2005 by veteran logger Sig Kemmler, his son Jason Kemmler, and family friend Bridger Schmidt. They offer single-stem logging services – a way of harvesting hard-to-reach trees on steep terrain, beside cliffs, or in unstable soil. Workers climb the tree and de-limb it with chain saws. Jigging crews cut the tree at its base and a helicopter lifts it from its stump. AFO also does wind firming (thinning the canopy of trees so they don’t knock each other down in the wind) and traditional hand falling.

“Their supervision is excellent now,” he says. “They’ve put a lot of time and effort into their health and safety program. From our point of view, it has good documentation, it shows they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing, and it shows they’re doing it on a regular basis.”

## Supervisor savvy

To AFO partner Jason Kemmler, one of the hallmarks of a good supervisor is knowing how to deliver feedback and critiques without making crews feel defensive or discouraged.


“If you’re being strict and unreasonable, then you’re going to get that back,” he says. “For me, it’s important to communicate to them that these are the standards that we’ve all signed and my job is to enforce them – no feelings attached. This is business, so when I come into their quarter and find fault, it’s not me attacking them personally. It’s having accountability for the company, being able to say: ‘This is what we are committed to and these are the standards you agreed to when you became a certified faller in B.C.’”

The B.C. Forest Safety Council also recognizes the importance of effective supervision in the woods. In response to an industry-wide demand for standardized safety training for supervisors, the Council is launching the sector’s first supervisor training program, which will lead to certification of forest supervisors. The first of two in a series of courses

is the Basic Forest Supervisor course and is open to anyone who instructs, directs, and manages forestry workers or anyone who aspires to be in a supervisory role.

The three-day course includes two days of classroom instruction and a written exam, followed by one day of applying the lessons in the bush. It is the foundation and prerequisite program for a two-day specialized faller supervisor training course. Completing both earns a supervisor the opportunity to be certified as a faller supervisor after further evaluation by the Council.

“These courses fill a huge gap identified by industry,” says Steve Mueller, director of the worker development program for the B.C. Forest Safety Council. “Time and time again, research found supervisors had not received adequate health and safety training and didn’t understand their responsibilities. These programs help to address that problem.”

For more information on the forest supervisor training, visit [www.bcforestsafes.org](http://www.bcforestsafes.org). 

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