

THE INTERIOR NEWS

Ombudsman completes first year

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The first year for the province's new Forest Safety Ombudsman was a learning process.

"My first few months as the forest ombudsman were spent visiting every region of the province and speaking with as many forest workers, contractors, companies and organizations as I could," said Roger Harris in the resulting report Not Out of the Woods.

"As I started to receive the views and concerns, it became quite clear that, in addition to issues between individuals and companies, there were a significant number of more general issues that would be raised that required a broader, industry-wide response."

Chief among the issues facing the forestry industry, Harris ascertained, was the recruitment, training and retention of workers, which he described as a "serious crisis."

At the end of his first year, Harris produced 15 recommendations almost all of which dealt with training and standards designed to reduce serious injury, especially fatalities, which reached an all-time high in 2005 of 43.

That is when the B.C. Forest Council -- created the year before with support from WorkSafe BC -- decided an ombudsman was needed so that industry workers would have an impartial and confidential means to express concerns.

Harris was a natural choice. In 1986, while working as a falling contractor, his right hand was nearly severed when his chainsaw kicked back. His brother-in-law was killed in a forestry accident at age 18.

"I have a passion for the woods becoming a safe place because I've been there.

"I've lived the worst side of it, but I think it's still the greatest occupation in the world. I want the Ombudsman's office to be a vehicle that deals with issues before we have incidents."

In 2006, fatalities were reduced to just 12. As of Sept. 19, 14 fatalities had been recorded for 2007. The most dangerous occupation in the sector remains log hauling.

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