

We turn regulatory theory into real-world safety

By Steve Mueller and Bill Bolton
BC Forest Safety Council

For years, everyone in British Columbia's forest sector agreed that its historically high fatality and injury rates must be reversed. But consensus on how to do that was hard to come by - until 2004 and the provincial government's Forest Safety Task Force.

The task force and its far-reaching recommendations broke the logjam by gaining unanimous endorsement from representatives of industry, workers and WorkSafeBC.

Today, voices like those guide the BC Forest Safety Council, created in late 2004 to work on key task force recommendations — including crucial ones surrounding a serious lack of effective supervision everywhere in the working woods.

The issue is undeniable, and last year it surfaced twice again. In a Council survey, nearly 1,200 experienced, certified B.C. fallers identified supervisor training as a top forest safety need. As well, WorkSafeBC inspections of 300 forestry work sites found a fourth with no designated supervisors at all, while of those two-thirds of the supervisors who were present weren't properly trained to oversee the work they were responsible for.

Now that's changing. In early 2007, the Council started offering the first two in a series of courses that will grow into a comprehensive program formally certifying forest sector supervisors.

First is the basic forest supervisor's course,

two days of classroom instruction and one day applying those lessons in the bush. This is the foundation for the subsequent two day specialized faller supervisor training that is divided between class and field work. Both are offered in large centres and small communities throughout the province.

Anyone can take the basic course, which is the pre-requisite for the specialized faller supervisor training. Later in 2007 we plan to offer those completing both courses the opportunity to become certified faller supervisors after further Council evaluation.

By the end of 2008, we hope to be running other specialized supervisor training that, with the basic course, would lead to certification of supervisors in mechanized harvesting, log hauling, silviculture and other specialties.

All this builds on what supervisors "must have" to function effectively and protect workers. What would be "nice to know" isn't part of our training — not only because that would mean producing a college course, but also because staying safe doesn't need to be complicated.

The simple facts are that:

- Supervisors are legally obligated to ensure their workers' safety and to know the B.C. Workers' Compensation Act and the regulations that cover the work being supervised. Given the human and financial costs of injuries, we also see this as a moral obligation and a business imperative.

- In our province, satisfying those obligations isn't as hard as it seems. Pretty much everything you need to know is spelled out in WorkSafeBC forest safety regulations. They're the guts of the Council's supervisor training.

That emphasis surprises people, but only until they see how it lets them take a regulatory requirement and make it work on the ground. The regulation should work for you, not the other way around, but you need to know how to use it. Too many people don't.

We offer a kind of guided tour, teaching you to pinpoint regulations relating specifically to your work. Think of it as translating what looks like regulatory theory into real-world practice.

For instance, our basic course shows all forest supervisors, in practical terms, how to satisfy the requirement to make regular inspections "of all workplaces, including buildings, structures, grounds, excavations, tools, equipment, machinery and work methods and practices, at intervals that will prevent the development of unsafe working conditions."

Here's another example for faller supervisors. You face the broad requirement of "ensuring the faller's well-being at least every 30 minutes", and our training gives you the practical ways of conducting individual faller man-checks across often widely spread falling sites.

This is useful, potentially life-saving information — at the very least, a starting point for getting clarification. You're always better off asking a hypothetical "how to" question than you are explaining "what happened" after an injury.

In that sense, the Council's supervisor training pays off for everyone.

It helps employers demonstrate due diligence and satisfy requirements for the SAFE Companies program that's becoming a minimum standard for forest operations in B.C.

Supervisors with training are readier to meet their own legal obligations and be more valuable employees in their own right.

Forest workers can count on able supervision giving them a better chance of going home in one piece. We don't know anyone who can argue with that. ■

Steve Mueller is the director and Bill Bolton the senior advisor of worker development for the BC Forest Safety Council. Information on their work, the SAFE Companies program and other Council initiatives is at www.bcforsafe.org.

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