



Iffy market can't affect safety: forest council

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Now is not the time to slow up on safety initiatives, even though the forest sector is facing a soaring loonie, low lumber prices and the beetle epidemic, B.C. Forest Safety Council CEO Tanner Elton said Wednesday.

The combination of difficulties facing the forest industry -- which also include a 15-per-cent export tax on lumber to the U.S. -- have increased the financial pressure on the sector.

Elton told a Prince George Chamber of Commerce luncheon he has been asked if now is a good time to ease back on programs.

"You don't do safety just when the times are good," he told the audience, adding the council must continue its work to improve safety.

In his presentation, Elton outlined that the safety council's work is showing results.

That work -- which has buy-in from industry -- includes increased awareness and a critical safety certification program for companies, said Elton.

Between 2005 and 2006, there has been a drop in injury total claims to 936 from 1,193, a 21.5-per-cent decrease, and a reduction in the overall injuries and costs from \$45.5 million to \$27.8 million in the forestry sector. The figures compiled by the forest safety council don't include the sawmilling and log hauling sectors.

The safety council figures show a similar pattern to statistics provided to The Citizen by WorkSafe B.C., a general downward trend, although smaller than in the figures Elton provided. Log hauling results are mixed, however, with more claims in 2006 than in 2003 or 2002, and higher benefits costs in 2006 than in 2002.

"We still have a long way to go, but it is good to see that we are trending in the right direction, because we were not formerly," Elton told reporters after his presentation. "We made some real progress."

He said it is particularly important to continue to implement the council's safety certification program, and ensure that all companies are certified. So far, about 2,600 companies have registered and 300 are certified.

The impetus for companies is strong as B.C. Forests Minister Rich Coleman has already said

companies wanting to bid on B.C. Timbers Sales harvesting licences must eventually become safety certified.

Elton also expects technology will play a bigger role in safety, including on resource roads. "There are some really simple things like signage and radio frequencies, but I think some of the really busy roads I could see us going to GPS (a positioning system) and following everybody on a computer screen so we would know where everybody is, like they do with flight control," he said.

Another key aspect will be to continue to put out better information on incidents, injuries and fatalities, sharing the root causes and lessons learned, across the province, said Elton.

While forest fatalities dropped from a high of 43 in 2005, to 12 in 2006, they have have increased slightly to 15 this year.

In northern B.C., five forest workers have been killed so far this year, down from seven the year before.

Two drivers were killed in pickup truck crashes this month on logging roads, one just east of Bear Lake and another north of Fort St. James.

A skidder operator was killed near Quesnel in July, and a worker troubleshooting a skidder was killed near Dawson Creek in January. A worker was also killed in a sort yard near Terrace in March.

Central Interior Logging Association manager Rick Publicover said the continuing fatalities show that incidents are still happening, and the focus on safety must be kept up more than ever.

Publicover had highlighted the dropping WorkSafe B.C. claim numbers and costs as "good news" in a newsletter sent to the logging association's members this week.

"A safety culture takes time ... You've got to stay the course," he said in an interview. "In order for us to be successful this is going to be a long term change. And it needs to happen at all levels and organizations -- from owners, supervisors and workers. Everybody has to do their part."