



Maintaining Critical Mass On the Crucial Safety Issue

A CRUCIAL ISSUE AFFECTS BRITISH COLUMBIA'S forestry sector, and a good way to describe the current situation is 'critical mass'—the point at which change can occur and when it's possible to maintain a chain reaction that will generate energy. This issue is safety, and it carries far-reaching implications.

What's at stake was spelled out in the 2004 provincial Forest Safety Task Force report, which found that the high injury and fatality rates in BC were exacting an excessive human toll and limiting the forestry sector's competitiveness. The task force said that increased safety in the forest sector requires a cultural shift where we reject the current level of risk and begin to manage risk more effectively.

The task force made a series of safety recommendations that affect every aspect of the forest sector from bush camps to the boardroom that were unanimously endorsed by all the major players. Although many forest professionals led the way to the initial implementation of these recommendations, we and our association still have an important role to play in the realization of these recommendations.

Five years ago, the need for a cultural shift became painfully clear at my company. Before then, our existing safety program had cut medical injuries by over 80%. But our world came crashing down in October 2002 when we recorded two fatalities in a short 12-day period. More than statistics, the people who lost their lives were workers who left behind grieving families, co-workers and communities. I had already experienced the aftermath of too many serious injuries and fatalities and, like everyone else, wanted to know what went so terribly wrong. Eventually, we concluded that our company's safety program didn't have a handle on the dangerous and widespread attitude, or culture, about safety. This attitude was a historic and habitual acceptance of workplace death and injury.

Soon after that awful October, our company began the process of incorporating

a culture of safety into our operations. We established seven fundamental safety values and beliefs with the first declaring: 'safety as the company's overriding priority.' We also have a corporate code of conduct that emphasizes safety as the 'uncompromised right and responsibility of all employees.' More than noble sentiments, we try to make these values and beliefs operational imperatives for all workers and contractors.

It isn't always clear where to begin fostering a cultural shift. We have made headway, but change won't be easy because both individuals and groups are involved. In this chicken-and-egg situation, the incubator is the BC Forest Safety Council that was created in 2004 as a result of the findings of the provincial Forest Safety Task Force. SAFE Companies, the council's flagship program, will mean an improvement in forestry safety. This program has had a huge impact on our company and helped to step up our attention to detail. Now we involve every employee and contractor in workplace safety. Over time, this province-wide initiative will raise the bar for all BC forestry operations.

But time is of the essence, and this brings me back to my two starting points. Firstly, the forest sector has achieved critical mass for deep-seated and long overdue improvements in workplace safety. But more improvements are necessary to successfully build and sustain a true culture of safety. The entire sector must maintain the initial momentum for this cultural shift by actively supporting safety process and adding to the vital energy for change that has been generated by the BC Forest Safety Council.

Secondly, safety should be considered part of our role as forest professionals and the role of our association. We still have lots to contribute to this initiative, and because of our unique position in the forest sector, it is our responsibility to take action. Although we don't build roads or bridges, harvest cutblocks,

drive logging trucks or plant seedlings, we are in a position to see the big picture. This perspective provides us with the knowledge and tools necessary to identify potential safety issues and their solutions. Who better than forest professionals to make safety the paramount priority for the entire forest sector?

We, as forest professionals, need to incorporate a safety lens in all of our field and planning activities. This means educating ourselves about WorkSafeBC regulations, and related issues, and applying this knowledge directly to mitigate hazardous conditions for workers carrying out these plans. Some examples of how this knowledge can be applied are:

- Removing danger trees along timber boundaries for yarding crews—especially in helicopter logging.
- Identifying unstable terrain and developing a schedule to determine when it is safe to work in certain areas.
- Developing measures to identify, assess and control risks associated with steep ground.

Forest professionals' plans must address these kinds of hazards and these plans must be communicated to supervisors and crews before any work begins. I'm not saying these steps aren't already being taken, but we can, and should, do more.

As individuals and through the ABCFP, we must move to make safety an overriding priority in all of our endeavours. Until we make this cultural shift, too many forest workers will continue to risk their lives and get hurt on the job. 🐾

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