

Better road safety

We need to take action and put safety in the driver's seat

by **ROGER HARRIS**

All of British Columbia's resource roads add up to nearly twice the distance to the moon—about 650,000 earthbound kilometres that can be deadly dangerous driving, as Joseph Leroux and others have demonstrated. On a spring evening two years ago, the 52-year-old died on the Finlay-Philip Forest Service Road near Mackenzie, B.C., 190 kilometres north of Prince George. His loaded logging truck unexpectedly met another empty one at a corner and went over an embankment.

The Leroux case was unusual because it led to a coroner's inquest last year, believed to be the first inquest into the death of a log trucker in northern B.C. The coroner's jury produced 16 recommendations directed at the Ministry of Forests and Range, WorkSafeBC, the BC Forest Safety Council and the Insurance Corporation of B.C.

The recommendations were well-thought-out, and I want to focus on just one of them: that ICBC implement a forestry endorsement for Class 1 driver's licences that would require 50 hours of "ride-along time in a commercial logging truck."

That proposal is grounded in the reality of our province's resource roads. Consider that:

- There are 29 different trailer configurations for logging trucks.
- A unique and extensive range of skills and expertise is necessary to operate the numerous vehicle configurations in the wide variety of conditions found on resource roads.
- Grades of 20 to 25 per cent are common on resource roads; this is twice the steepness

that is found on most paved highways.

In early 2007, I published a report on the impacts on forestry safety of labour shortages and inadequate training. Six months before the Leroux inquest, I recommended that the BC Forest Safety Council develop a system to certify logging truck drivers and that ICBC introduce a related Class 1 licence endorsement.

The idea was more than my bright idea; it followed feedback on resource road problems identified for me in months of provincewide input from forest licencees, contractors, logging truck drivers, training institutions and agencies that fund truck-driver training. They offered a clear consensus that existing minimum employment requirements for drivers often fall far short of the expertise actually required to operate loaded logging trucks.

I released a separate report this February that focused entirely on resource roads. Three key factors led to this work, titled *No Longer the Road Less Travelled*. First, log hauling leads all other occupations for fatalities in B.C.'s forest sector. Second, resource road traffic volumes are mushrooming. Finally, the largest percentage of calls received by my office involves resource road maintenance and construction, regulatory jurisdiction and cycle times.

For this new report, I looked beyond the forest sector to collect information in months of meetings across the province. This is because resource roads serve many other industries, including mining, gas, oil, tourism, agriculture and general freight cargo, to name a few. As well, resource roads are literally the only points of access to the public highway system for some communities, especially First Nations.

The broader input resulted in a new, more comprehensive recommendation to improve the qualifications of all users of our re-

source roads—including drivers of light vehicles such as pickup trucks, who accounted for four of the five fatalities on logging roads last year.

I continue to advocate for a driver certification-endorsement system that includes the full range of vehicles and trailer configurations under the Class 1 licence. But in the new report, I also propose extending an endorsement-training program to include drivers of all classes of vehicles that operate on our resource roads.

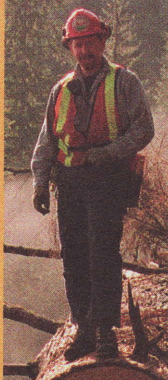
The demand for more qualified drivers will only grow in the coming years, given factors such as the development of inland ports in Prince George to steadily expanding activity in all resource sectors.

To meet that demand, our province needs a professional truck driver force that is properly trained in the full range of skills necessary to operate specific trucks in specific situations, like on resource roads. This means training and qualification programs based on provincially recognized levels of training and expertise confirmed by certification or endorsement. Last year's coroner's jury saw this clearly, and it was confirmed by contributors to both of my reports on forestry safety.

I urge ICBC to consider these facts and take the lead in moving forward on this crucial issue. Given our crowded resource roads, action is needed now, because time is not our friend. Just ask the men and women driving B.C.'s resource roads every day—whose trips shouldn't end as Joseph Leroux's did.

Roger Harris has held the independent ombudsman's position created by the BC Forest Safety Council since 2006, investigating forest safety issues and recommending how best to address them. More information, and the full text of his first two reports, can be found at www.bcforestsafesafe.org/nav-ombud.html. **FW**

Get home safe



SAFETY IS VITAL

to the people who work in British Columbia's forest sector. Everyone wants to get home safe at the end of the day.

The BC Forest Safety Council is working with employers and workers to improve safety programs and performance. We are training workers and companies to recognize and manage the hazards of working in the forest.

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The SAFE Companies program is now underway. Companies can register, have their safety programs audited, get certified and receive rebates on their WCB payments.

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Unsafe is Unacceptable