



Emergency Drills: A Critical Lifeline in Forestry Operations

SAFE Companies Explains Why

When we think about emergency drills, it's easy to see them as just another regulatory requirement; a checkmark on the compliance list. But in forestry operations, emergency drills are essential to worker safety.

In BC, forestry work often takes place in remote, hard-to-access areas where emergency response can be significantly delayed. Unlike workplaces where emergency responders may arrive within minutes, some forestry operations face challenges like rough access roads, poor weather conditions and crews spread across large operating areas. And workers may be operating on steep terrain, in heavy timber or at temporary worksites far from emergency services.

With this in mind, it may take a long time for BC Emergency Health Services to reach an injured worker and in some cases, that worker may have to be transported a considerable distance before they can even meet an ambulance. In these environments, a workplace injury can quickly become more serious if crews are not prepared.

That is why emergency drills are so important. They prepare workers, supervisors and first aid attendants for situations when help may be hours away and where a successful rescue depends on planning, communication and teamwork.

More Than Regulatory Compliance:

Employers need to fully understand section 3.17(4) of the OHS Regulation that states emergency and first aid scenario drills must be conducted at least once a year and/or whenever the procedures change. The employer must ensure that a medical scenario drill ensures the procedures are effective, and workers, first aid attendants and other persons referred to in subsection (3) are capable of fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

While compliance is important, the real value of these drills lies in ensuring workers can be safely reached, treated and transported when every minute matters.

Conducting Drills and Preparing for the Unexpected:

Conducting an emergency drill may help answer critical questions before a real incident occurs. The middle of an emergency is not the time to discover weaknesses in the plan. When planning a drill, consider asking these questions and try creating scenarios around them:

- Can workers quickly communicate that an emergency has occurred? Do they know how to explain their location to other people on site and to emergency responders? Do they know what information 911 will require?
- Do all workers know how to summon first aid? Do they know how to explain the injury?
- Can first aid attendants reach the injured worker without delays? Can an injured worker be safely packaged and moved over challenging terrain? Who is the best person to manage the situation and keep the crew on task?
- Does everyone know where the equipment, supplies and first aid facilities are located based on their site location? How quickly can they access them if needed?
- Are transportation routes accessible and clearly understood? What barriers could there be to access the area? (i.e. weather, road damage, etc.) Are designated extraction or ambulance meeting points still accessible?

For many forestry operations, the most challenging part of an emergency response is extracting the injured worker from the area and getting them to the handoff point for emergency services. By conducting a drill, you might find the critical flaws that might otherwise go unnoticed, such as poor radio coverage, blocked access routes or insufficient equipment or supplies.

Forestry operations change constantly as harvesting areas move, roads are built or deactivated and crew locations shift throughout the season. What worked six months ago may not work today, which is why every drill provides an opportunity to identify areas for improvement. A successful drill may confirm that procedures are working as intended

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and can be equally valuable if it shows deficiencies that can be corrected before a worker's life is at risk. And the most effective drills challenge crews to think beyond routine situations and prepare for complications that often occur during real emergencies

Everyone Has a Role to Play:

One of the most important reasons for conducting drills is to make sure everyone understands their role during an emergency. In a real incident, the first aid attendant is only one part of the response. Other team members may be responsible for calling emergency services, guiding responders to the site, controlling traffic on resource roads, preparing transportation, managing site communications or helping evacuate the injured worker.

When people understand what's expected of them, they're more confident and better prepared to act. As a result, the response is more organized and efficient, delays are reduced, and critical tasks are less likely to be missed.

Drills can also help identify gaps in procedures and emergency response plans, giving teams the opportunity to make adjustments or improvements before a real emergency occurs.

But emergency response plans are often built around the assumption that incidents will unfold exactly as planned, but real emergencies rarely follow the script. What happens if multiple workers are injured in the same incident? What if the designated first aid attendant is one of the injured workers? What if a key person is working in another area and can't respond immediately? These are the kinds of scenarios that emergency drills should test.

When conducting drills, workers need to understand not only their primary role but also who they may need to support if circumstances change. People may need to take on additional responsibilities or temporarily fill another worker's role. For example:

- A supervisor may need to coordinate emergency transportation while also managing communications with emergency services.
- A worker assigned to traffic control may need to assist with patient packaging or evacuation.
- A backup first aid attendant may need to assume responsibility if the primary attendant is unavailable.
- Crew members may need to share responsibilities when dealing with multiple injured workers.

Practising these situations helps build flexibility into the emergency response plan and ensures the crew can adapt on the fly.

Documenting Lessons Learned

At the conclusion of an emergency drill, employers need to document observations and discuss the lessons learned, then make any adjustments to the planned procedures. Drill records should contain:

- Date and time of drill
- Names and roles of participants
- Brief summary of scenario tested
- Summary of observations and outcomes, including any deficiencies identified
- Any corrective actions taken

Emergency drills should never be viewed as a burden. In forestry, they are an essential risk management tool that helps protect workers operating in some of the most challenging environments in the province.

When crews understand their roles and know how to support one another, they are far better equipped to manage a serious incident when a chaotic situation unfolds. If an emergency happens, every worker on site should have confidence that they know exactly what to do as quickly and safely as possible, working as a team to bring the situation under control. 🧯

In the *Falling* section of this issue, read how the BCFSC's has established a Remote Work Emergency Response Steering Committee focused on emergency response planning at remote forestry worksites. This work will play a key role in identifying improvements that can enhance emergency preparedness and extraction planning across the forestry sector.

