

Report says tree fallers in B.C. are dying at unacceptably high rates

By GREG JOYCE C-News

VANCOUVER (CP) - Tree fallers in British Columbia forests are dying at alarming rates and the industry, the workers compensation board and the Forests Ministry are to blame, says a report released Thursday.

"There have been 59 fallers killed in the last 10 years and four in this season already," said Mike McKibbin, president of the Western Fallers Association. "Eleven have been involved in crippling accidents and there are only a couple thousand of us operating in B.C.," said McKibbin, who compiled the report after interviewing many of the 250 self-employed fallers who work for various logging contractors in the province.

Fallers are the workers who are among the first into an area that is slated for logging. Their job, which is to cut down the trees, has always been regarded as one of the most dangerous occupations.

McKibbin and Tanner Elton, CEO of the B.C. Forest Safety Council, cited a litany of reasons for the high fatality and accident rate.

But the general theme was that rules and regulations in place are not enforced by the industry, the Forests Ministry and WorkSafeBC, which used to be known as the Workers Compensation Board (WCB).

"Many logging contractors display an attitude of 'Whatever it takes, just do it to get the job done.' " said McKibbin. "This is turning our forests into death zones."

McKibbin, who has been a faller for 30 years, said WorkSafeBC "is not out there enforcing their rules and regulations. The Forests Ministry doesn't seem to be out there either."

But Elton placed primary blame on the industry.

"WCB has an important role, but if you ask who is responsible for safety in the forest, it is the industry," he said.

"WCB can play a role in weeding out bad actors and ensuring compliance rates go up, but industry can play a much more effective job."

A spokesman for the Council of Forest Industries, which represents the industry, was not immediately available to comment.

In Victoria, Labour Minister Mike de Jong, previously the minister of forests, said he would find ways to reverse the dangers.

"It's entirely unacceptable," the minister said. "These are terrible numbers and it's part of a trend."

He said he had spoken to McKibbin and Elton and the unions involved "and it's got to stop."

He said he hoped to meet with the association and others soon to form a strategy to reduce the number of forestry deaths.

The report cites some problems that put pressure on fallers and makes

recommendations.

Selective harvesting, a new type of logging that replaces the old-style clearcutting methods, "forces fallers to break numerous WCB rules and regulations that have been put in place for fallers' safety."

The fallers, he said, are forced to wade through mountains of debris on dangerous slopes to get to the selected tree.

He said fallers face enormous pressure from contractors to get the job done quickly to maximize profits.

Some licensees delay their cutting while they wait for lower stumpage (royalty) rates they must pay to the province, he said.

"We urge the Forests Ministry to (extend) the issuing of permits so the season is longer and there is not as much pressure."

McKibbin, the report's author, said he was told by fellow fallers that they are often afraid to complain about unsafe practices.

"Fallers who ignore safety are rewarded with more work and extended shifts. They (contractors) find a younger, more ignorant man on the crew to do it."

Board inspectors, McKibbin said, must give one-day notice of when they want to inspect a site, thereby giving the contractor time to "clean things up."

WorkSafeBC spokeswoman Donna Freeman said notice is intended to ensure board inspectors don't put themselves in danger of being injured by appearing on a site without the knowledge of those working in the area.

She said that fallers, or any worker who feels the workplace is dangerous, have a legal right to refuse to do such work.

The board has the association's report, is reviewing it and intends to set up a meeting to deal with their concerns, she said.

The association called for the establishment of a task force to determine "what a faller can safely accomplish in a day."

Fallers are working with standards that were established in the 1960s and '70s, said McKibbin, but the types of logging have changed.

McKibbin and Elton declined to provide the names of some of the "bad actors" in the industry but suggested they might later if there are no improvements.

To put the problem in perspective, Elton conceded that the B.C. forest industry was comparatively unsafe.

"We're not as good. Our forest safety record does not compare favourably to other jurisdictions such as Washington, Oregon, Scandinavia, Ontario and Quebec."

But not all forest companies are to blame, he said.

"We've got folks operating on the coast with really good safety records. We've got people operating with bad safety records."