

Logging deaths spark outrage

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by GORDON HOEKSTRA Citizen staff

The death toll in the forest sector in B.C. continues to mount in 2005, including in log trucking in the Northern Interior, prompting distress and calls for action by various industry groups.

There have been 27 fatalities in 2005, including fallers, truckers, sawmill workers and workers on their way to their jobs.

On Thursday, the Western Fallers Association released the first-ever report on safety in the woods by workers who fall the trees. It condemned the industry, the Workers' Compensation Board and the forests ministry for allowing unsafe practices resulting in unnecessary deaths and serious injuries.

An industry attitude of "whatever it takes to get the job done" is turning B.C.'s forests into a death zone, said fallers association president Mike McKibbin.

"There have been 59 fallers killed in the past 10 years and four in this season already," said McKibbin, a faller for 30 years.

McKibbin stressed that regulations and practices need to change and says logging contractors who don't ensure the safety of their forest workers should be shut down.

B.C. Forest Safety Council executive director Tanner Elton said while the WCB can help, industry has to solve the issues. And Elton said although the report focuses on fallers, there are lessons for the entire sector, including log truck drivers.

NDP forestry critic Bob Simpson said the key issue is for the government to review the systemic problems behind the fatalities, including whether policy changes and cuts to the forests ministry and WCB staff are having an impact.

Labour Minister Mike de Jong, responding to a question from the NDP in the legislature, said the province would be convening immediately with all stakeholders to come up with a specific strategy to deal with the rising fatalities.

Last week, a log trucker died in an accident in Prince George when his truck went off the road and struck a power pole. Last winter two other log truck drivers died in crashes in the Northern Interior -- one in an accident north of Prince George and another south of Fraser Lake. In the past four years a dozen log truckers have died in highway and logging road accidents in the Northern Interior, show statistics compiled by the Citizen.

Central Interior Logging Association general manager Roy Nagel said the trend shows an increase in fatalities during the past few years. "That's pretty darned distressing," said Nagel.

The logging association highlighted the staggering number of fatalities in its weekly newsletter to members. While noting the details of the recent crashes are not known, Nagel asked whether the accidents could have been prevented. "Do you think about safety when you get behind the wheel, climb onto a machine or send the crew out for the day?" he warned.

Prince George Trucking Association president Dan Henry said while efforts are underway to create a forestry trucking safety program, something has to happen quickly.

The forestry trucking program is an initiative of the B.C. Forest Safety Council, which was created after a B.C. government-commissioned task force made a more than a dozen recommendations 18 months ago to decrease the staggering death toll in the industry. The task force was struck to reduce the fatality rate in the logging sector, which has the highest fatality rate of all industries in B.C.

Between 1993 and 2002 there were 250 logging-related deaths in the province. Log fallers and logging truck drivers lead the death toll. Between 1998 and 2002, 26 fallers and 24 logging truck drivers died in the province. Since then, the death rate has not slowed.

Henry said if the new trucking safety program gets off the ground, it will help. "As long as it doesn't get watered down, or as long as it doesn't become a whole bunch of paperwork again with nothing really happening," he stressed.

Canfor president and CEO Jim Shepherd, chairman of the B.C. Forest Safety Council, is also concerned about the continuing high number of fatalities. During a visit to Prince George this week, he said it's obvious the industry is not doing enough, even though all the sectors -- fallers, truckers, industry, union -- are at the table with the safety council.

"So, we have come up with thoughts, we have come up with programs, we have come up with urgency, but today, I don't see that is really improving anything," said Shepherd. "And the question is how do we get this change of mindset in our industry, right across the board. To say: Safety is important. Fatalities are just not acceptable."

This week, the United Steelworkers suggested shutting down the forest sector for a day of mourning each time a worker dies because of the mounting death toll.

"It's getting worse instead of better is the perception of a lot of our members," said steelworkers official Ron Corbeil. Maybe workers need to do down to the local arena and talk about what's going wrong after each one of these deaths, he said.