

Fallers face working in 'death zones'

Faster, cheaper cutting at fault

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B.C.'s woods have turned into death zones for fallers as penny-pinching companies flout safety rules and regulators let dangerous work practices run amok, an explosive new report charges.

The Western Fallers Association's report, released yesterday, blasts industry, B.C.'s workers' compensation board and the ministry of forests for letting lax safety practices kill and maim fallers.

The top factor in falling accidents across B.C. is contractors' push to cut trees quickly and cheaply, survey author Mike McKibbin told a Vancouver news conference where the report was released.

"Many logging contractors display an attitude of 'whatever it takes, just do it to get the job done,'" said McKibbin, himself a faller for 30 years.

"This is turning our forests into death zones."

Regulatory breakdown means fallers must violate WCB safety rules to conduct eco-friendly but hazardous techniques such as single-stem harvesting, where only single trees are cut in a given area, the report said.

Fallers who try to comply with safety issues are condemned by employers. Those who throw safety to the wind are rewarded with more work from contractors, McKibbin said.

"There has been a clash between how WCB dictates things should be done and how the industry dictates things be done, with the fallers caught right smack in the middle," the report said.

Ninety-five per cent of contractors let logging waste be flung to the sides of roads on steep slopes, creating an environment where boulders and other debris may hurtle down on fallers, he said.

"We've been bombarded by snags, we end up under dead falls and in some cases, logs and trees being cut by men above them are rocketing through our quarters," McKibbin said.

"A lot of this is coming from pressures to produce." The one-day advance notice of a safety inspection given by the WCB lets bad actors clean things up before they arrive, McKibbin said.

Nor does the board adequately enforce its rules, he charged. These and other practices form a deadly backdrop to the four fatalities and 11 crippling accidents that have occurred among B.C. fallers this year alone, he said.

The report is based on interviews with many of the 250 independent fallers belonging to the WFA. It marks the first report focused on the observations of workers who actually fall trees.

Forestry workers and employers each have rights and responsibilities, said Donna Freeman, spokesperson for WorkSafe B.C., formerly the WCB.

"Clearly, workers have the right to be safe at work. They have the right to refuse unsafe work and they have to report unsafe conditions to WorkSafe B.C.," Freeman said.

Coast Forest Products Association president Rick Jeffery said the licensees his group represents take the report seriously and will study its accusations.

The WFA represents "a small subset" of the 4,000 fallers across B.C., Jeffery said.

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FALLERS -- WORKERS WITH THE MOST DANGEROUS JOB IN NORTH AMERICA'

- Four fallers have been killed in B.C. so far this year and 11 injured, the Western Fallers Association says. - This year's third fatality occurred during a May meeting of the B.C. Forest Safety Council, an industry-labour organization.

- In the year's fourth fatality, a faller working in the Fraser Lake area west of Prince George was falling a 20-centimetre-diameter spruce.

"As the spruce fell, it disturbed a standing 10-inch diameter poplar snag which broke off six feet from the ground and consequently came down and struck him," the WFA says.

- Fallers have accounted for 59 of 250 fatalities in B.C.'s forest industry during the last 10 years.

- B.C.'s forest sector has had 27 fatalities and 58 serious injuries to date this year - the highest of any industrial sector, the safety council says.

Ran with fact box "Fallers -- workers with 'the most dangerous job in North America'", which has been appended to the story.

