

## **Death in the woods must not be a cost of doing business**

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While most of the attention in the forest industry this year has been on the softwood lumber dispute with the United States, forest workers in British Columbia have been dying at an appalling rate.

As of this writing, accidents in the woods have cut short the lives of 30 workers already this year, which is above the horrific long-term average of about 25 deaths a year.

A report last week from the Western Fallers Association blamed a regulatory breakdown, a "get-the-job-done" attitude by contractors and unsafe practices, which they said were turning our forests into death zones.

Some forest executives were quick to deny a scofflaw attitude towards safety regulations, but the body count alone is grim testimony to working conditions that cannot in many ways be considered safe.

The latest spike in deaths follows what has been described as a concerted effort to make what has historically been the most dangerous profession in Canada a little safer.

In 2003, then labour minister Graham Bruce appointed a committee to look into why so many workers were still getting killed in the woods.

That report reflected many of the same drivers listed by the fallers' association. The heart of the problem was and still seems to be a culture that too readily accepts deadly risks as a normal part of the job.

Fallers have reason to be concerned, since they have the most dangerous job in a dangerous business.

Last year, the B.C. Forest Safety Council started overseeing a certification program for fallers.

It's a good first step, but it's clear that not all unsafe practices are as a result of ignorance.

Too often, workers are being killed in B.C.'s forests because they take chances because of pressure, real or perceived, to turn time into money.

Labour Minister Mike de Jong told the legislature this week he is ready to roll up his sleeves and work with fallers, industry and the safety council to address the myriad factors that are still killing, in his words, an "atrocious" number of workers.

The woods are an inherently dangerous place to work, but they can be safer than they are.

As the fallers themselves admit, there is no single "magic bullet" to solve all the problems. The starting point, however, is for regulators, employers and workers to insist that safety has to come first.

The government can take a lead by ensuring that all deaths are adequately investigated and that companies that encourage or even allow unsafe practices are chastised severely and publicly enough to make it clear to the entire industry that death, dismemberment and disability are no longer considered simply part of the cost of doing business.

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