

## **Deaths of 2 loggers put focus on safety** **At least the subject is being discussed, safety advocates say**

By Gordon Hamilton

Two more British Columbia forest workers died within the last week, underscoring a breakdown of safety in the woods that loggers say is making their occupation even more dangerous.

The deaths bring the total number of forest workers killed this year to 29. Both deaths occurred on the same day, Sept. 23, a day after Labour Minister Mike de Jong told the legislature the death rate of 27 was unacceptable.

One man died when he was crushed between a tree and a mechanical timber harvester. The second died when he was run over by a log loader. He had a wife and two children.

The death rate prompted de Jong and Forests Minister Rich Coleman to meet Thursday with the B.C. Forest Safety Council, where loggers laid out incidents in which safety has dropped off the screen for everyone from government to forest licencees to contractors and workers.

Faller and safety advocate Mike McKibbin said he is devastated that another two deaths have been added to a fatality rate that has already been red-flagged as unacceptable.

"Two in one day is tragic. But it has moved everyone to do something about it," he said.

De Jong said in a later interview that the province has committed to plug one safety oversight: The fact that B.C. Timber Sales, which holds and contracts-out harvesting for 20 per cent of the province's timber supply, was not on board with industry initiatives to bring down the death rate. The government agency has agreed to join the forest safety council, he said.

De Jong, who is the minister responsible for WorkSafe B.C., formerly the Workers Compensation Board, also said that safety regimes administered by the province need to change to better reflect the way companies now operate in the bush.

Truck Loggers Association president Jim Girvan described in an interview one incident that he said illustrates how safety is being neglected. A forest company hired a heli-logging contractor to selectively harvest valuable trees from a stand of timber. The company then hired a ground-based logging contractor to go in and harvest the rest of the timber. The contractor in turn hired a falling contractor who said the site was unsafe because of the previous logging and would not send his crew in.

"The primary contractor went back to the major company and said 'My contractor feels it is unsafe.' So what happened? They just hired somebody else," Girvan said.

"Nobody was hurt but it speaks to a culture. The contractor was trying to suggest there was an unsafe activity. The company brought in somebody different and the Workers Compensation Board didn't say anything."

"There was clearly an unsafe situation that was identified and it went by the wayside."

For George Hoberg, head of the forest resources management department in the faculty of forestry at the University of B.C., a clear cause of the poor safety record is that the lives of forest workers are not highly valued.

"There are many causes here but the root cause when you get right down to it is that we are willing to tolerate these risks that people say are unacceptable. But we keep tolerating them."

Hoberg said there is a link between policy changes introduced by the Liberal government and the growth of small logging contractors.

Tanner Elton, chief executive officer of the forest safety council, said a greater proportion of the accidents and fatalities occurs with the small contractors.

Loggers say other factors include the economic climate on the coast, where companies are losing money despite cutting operations to the bone.

The policy changes resulted in a subsequent restructuring of the way forest companies operate on the land base. Major licencees, who once operated their own crews and were responsible for safety, have off-loaded logging to contractors who in turn hire sub-contractors. Also, B.C. Timber Sales is now a major player in letting contracts.

Elton said the changes have resulted in blurring of responsibility for safety. He said the industry needs to focus on where most accidents are occurring -- with the small operators who have moved into the industry to bid for B.C. Timber Sales contracts and contracts being let by the major companies.

He expressed confidence that the death rate can be brought down, saying that for the first time, all sectors agree that they must improve the safety record.

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## **DEADLY JOB:**

29: Forestry fatalities in 2005

5: Fatalities in the last three weeks

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