

B.C.'s new 'death zones'

Contractors' 'get-the-job-done' attitude blamed for risking fallers' lives

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Safety regulations are being blatantly ignored in British Columbia forests, according to the author of a report that details a systematic "regulatory break-down" that is putting fallers' lives at risk.

"Many logging contractors display an attitude of 'whatever it takes, just do it' to get the job done. This is turning our forests into death zones, with fallers working over cliffs and in debris left by heavy equipment and various forms of logging," said faller Mike McKibbon, president of the Western Fallers Association and author of the report *A View From the Field*.

The report lists 17 pages of Workers' Compensation Act regulations that the fallers allege are being routinely broken. At a news conference on Thursday, McKibbon presented a litany of safety hazards fallers face, which add up to a disconnect between regulatory requirements and what actually takes place in the bush.

McKibbon said his report is not full of graphs and charts detailing statistics, but is instead a compilation from "on-the-ground experiences" of the people who work and sometimes die in B.C.'s forests. Nevertheless, he ventured that 95 per cent of companies do not follow all regulations.

The 95-per-cent figure was quickly disputed by the forest industry, which termed the report significant but reflective only of the views of one group of workers.

The report was tabled with the B.C. Forest Safety Council, a multi-agency group formed in 2004 to improve B.C.'s forest safety record.

Twenty-seven workers have died in the forest industry this year, which council president Tanner Elton has described as unacceptable.

Elton said the report details a regulatory breakdown stemming from a number of causes, including:

- The restructuring of the industry.
- New environmentally friendly logging techniques that in some cases were not thought through from a safety point of view.
- An attitude prevalent among workers and employers that death is inevitable if you work in the woods.

He termed the report an "unvarnished, accurate reflection," of the hazards fallers face in B.C.

Elton said it will take a concerted effort at every level of the industry to turn around the fatality rate. With 2,000 fallers employed in B.C. at any given time, the report states that 58 have died in the past 10 years. So far this year, four fallers have died, and 11 have suffered crippling accidents.

McKibbon explained how harvesting practices have become more dangerous, singling out one type of eco-friendly logging, selective harvesting, that exposes fallers to additional hazards. He said companies target valuable trees and species, leaving the rest behind. Environmentalists approve because much of the forest is left intact. But when fallers drop trees in a thick forest, limbs and tops are broken and hurled back at the faller as the trees go down.

"Selective harvesting forces fallers to break numerous WCB rules and regulations that have been put in place for faller safety. It's an old fact with us. The practice of falling selective trees in congested areas must be stopped, or at least done by qualified fallers."

But the No. 1 killer, McKibbon said, is "the push" -- a situation where employers demand higher productivity, resulting in loggers trying to get more logs to market in less time and at lower cost. He described a typical example: Companies delay logging if stumpage rates (the levy charged by the province) are falling, and then will rush to get as much volume out of the bush before the rates climb again.

He called on the ministry of forests to smooth out the issuance of cutting permits "to give fallers a chance to safely do their jobs."

Labour Minister Mike deJong said in the legislature Thursday that he has spoken with McKibbon and he intends to meet immediately with industry stakeholders.

The report raises "a whole series of issues that need to be addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner," he said.

"I'm going to suggest to them that we set some very specific objectives that we can measure over the course of the next weeks and months, and attack this in detail."

Ric Slaco, chief forester at Interfor, said his company tries to instill safety awareness to combat the complex situations faced daily by workers in the bush.

He said in implementing new variable retention harvesting techniques, safety was one of three factors taken into account, and one reason Interfor did not rush into the practice. "I look at our safety statistics every quarter, and I don't recall in our own company where we have had an increase or history of accidents associated with retention."

Slaco said Interfor counts on fallers using their discretion in retention harvesting.

Rick Jeffery, president of the Coast Forest Products Association, said his group takes the report seriously, but he noted it does not quantify problems and represents only the views of a subset of employees in the industry.

The Western Fallers Association has 250 members. McKibbon said fallers are reluctant to join because they fear being fired.

McKibbon also said not all companies are breaking regulations. "There are still a few outfits doing the right things to help ensure that their fallers get out of the bush after each shift," he states in the report's introduction. "Our hats go off to you guys. You know who you are."

Donna Freeman, of WorkSafe BC, said if fallers believe they are being forced to break regulations they should report it.

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THE DARK SIDE OF THE FOREST:

Here are some of the perils the Western Fallers Association says its members face as they do one of the world's most dangerous jobs.

NATURALLY OCCURRING HAZARDS

- Blow down

Nature doesn't always pick a clear spot to fall a tree. The resulting "hang up," a fallen tree snagged in the limbs of other trees, can wait for fallers to be underneath it before it drops, with possibly fatal results.

- Cliffs

Fallers working for piece rates may be tempted on to steeper ground without proper gear. The WFA recommends ropes, crampons and a helper as tie-off man.

Excessive snowfalls

Snow and ice clinging to large branches and weighing in excess of 50 kg can suddenly drop from heights as great as 12 metres. Expect soft-tissue damage and broken bones.

- Heavy rain

The risk of mud and rock slides rises sharply as logging increasingly occurs on steeper, more broken ground.

- Excessive heat

Heat stroke, dehydration and subsequent leg cramps increase with prolonged use of big, air-cooled chainsaws raising temperatures in the immediate working vicinity.

MAN-MADE HAZARDS

- Road-building

Debris from road-building, including rocks, roots, stumps and whole trees, often ends up in fallers' working areas.

- Stacking fallers

Properly done, fallers can work above each other on steep ground. However, it can create hazards: For example, losing a tree on a steep slope, turning it into a "torpedo" blasting toward another faller.

- Retention falling

Selective harvesting targets certain species and grades of trees while leaving the remainder of a stand intact. As timber drops through those standing trees, limbs and tops can spring back at fallers and can also create hang ups waiting to drop at inopportune times. Retention falling is so hazardous that the WFA recommends abandoning the practice altogether.

- Uphill falling

Directing a tree to fall upslope decreases the force with which it drops and thus cuts back on damage to the timber, but gravity often causes the felled tree to slide down towards the faller. Most firms have dropped this practice but the WFA wants it halted altogether.

- Helicopter pads

Creating helicopter pads poses many of the risks associated with road-building: Debris creates hazards in fallers' working areas. The pads also require careful construction to avoid injury to flight crews and passengers.

THE LOGIC LOOP:

How regulatory breakdown can affect the safety of fallers:

1. Forest licensees are legally liable for safety on their tenures.
2. But licensees increasingly contract out harvesting, passing that liability on to their contractors.
3. Contractors hire subcontractors who, in turn hire fallers, who, if they want to work, are increasingly required to form their own companies and pay their own WCB premiums.
4. If a safety incident occurs, the faller, who is the employee as well as employer, is in the position of filing a report on himself, which would result in increasing his own WCB premiums, creating a conflict of interest.
5. When incidents are reported, B.C. Forest Safety Council president Tanner Elton says liability is no longer being traced back to the licensee.

Ran with fact boxes "The Dark Side of the Forest" and "The Logic Loop", which have been appended to the end of the story.

