

He's trying to help loggers stay alive: Falling B.C.'s trees can be one of the most dangerous jobs on the planet

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Tue 27 Sep 2005

Page: A10

Section: Comment

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Source: Special to Times Colonist

There are two trade-offs in the modern world that have always struck me as bad deals.

One of them is traffic fatalities. Each one is an individual horror, but they generally seem to be an accepted part of living in an automobile society. The personal convenience of building a society around cars costs us about eight lives a day in Canada. Despite all the public despair over the worst crashes, it's a price that is paid with few questions.

The other one, particular to B.C., is deaths in the woods. The province was built almost entirely on the forest industry and the hidden cost of the long-term prosperity that flows from that industry has always been an extraordinarily high fatality rate.

After three forest fatalities in as many weeks last spring, the new B.C. Forest Safety Council convened a special meeting to discuss the cluster.

Terrace faller Mike McKibbin went there as the president of the Western Fallers Association, a relatively new outfit representing about 250 independent fallers in B.C. The garrulous, outspoken 47-year-old contractor has 30 years experience in the woods and acknowledges he is "fairly well-known" in the business as a safety advocate.

He's packed buddies out of the forest on stretchers, he's done CPR on injured co-workers while clinging to the side of a cliff and he's been hands-on at some of those fatalities. McKibbin said Monday he "had a conniption fit" at the meeting, ranting and raving for 20 minutes about the death rate.

"If you want to know what's killing us," he told the council, "We'll tell you."

He was forceful enough that the council ordered a report on the issue. McKibbin started work on it soon after and last week his outfit released an engrossing 100-page dispatch right from the front lines.

You can tell early on this is not your typical statistical overview.

It opens with: "We know we're going to hit some nerves here, but quite frankly, we're not trying to make friends or win popularity contests, we're trying to get the fallers home safely on a daily basis."

McKibbin wrote that fallers get killed and hurt more than just about any group of workers on the planet. All the charts, graphs and documentation show that "we have been involved in a lot of carnage over the last 75 years and that not much had changed."

He writes about all the contributing factors in a personal, anecdotal style that brings it all home with much more impact than any bureaucratic report I've seen. (His report is at www.westernfallers.com)

But it's the numbers that triggered a burst of publicity last week when he made it public. He counts 59 fallers -- just one specific job category -- who have been killed on the job in the past 10 years. The total body count in all aspects of the industry over that time is about 250. Just this year there have been 30 deaths in all aspects of the industry, including people travelling to the job site.

The report got some media coverage and prompted some talk in the legislature, where Labour Minister Mike de Jong said the death toll -- pegged at 27 by one count -- is even higher: "The numbers I have suggest you can add three to that list of 27."

This, despite a new faller certification program that is predicated on safety first and has won support from all sectors of the industry.

New Democrats were keen to blame government shortcomings for the spike in fatalities, but de Jong said it's a broader issue than that. McKibbin concludes that as well: A lot of things have to change in a hurry.

He lists four main problems:

- Logging is inherently dangerous. He said "dismantling Mother Nature" will always be dangerous, and Mother Nature can be very unforgiving to anyone who tries, putting up all kinds of natural hazards.
- Man-made hazards. It's always going to be dangerous, but the workers don't make it any safer when they use sloppy, careless or stupid practices, or cheap out when it comes to best practices.
- Policy and regulation breakdowns. "Decisions are being made throughout different levels of the provincial government that clearly indicate there has been no consideration given to the faller being able to safely carry out some of the things being asked of us." McKibbin said environmental and esthetic view requirements -- smaller cut blocks, selective logging, feathered edges, etc. -- make the fallers' world a lot more dangerous than it need be.
- "The Push." He said the pressure to get more done, to get the maximum production out of the lowest bid on each job, might be the No. 1 contributing factor. "Many logging shows are operating on inhumane time frames to get the work done."

De Jong, to his credit, has arranged a snap meeting with McKibbin and others this Thursday to talk things over. Hopefully the ongoing responses to his plea for change will be as plain-spoken, heartfelt and direct as the report itself.

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Edition: Final
Story Type: Business; Column
Length: 840 words