

# Fighting for Fair: BC Forest Safety Ombudsman

By Roger Harris

The BC Forest Safety Ombudsman Office was established in 2006 by the BC Forest Safety Council. The Ombudsman Office has a mandate to investigate and provide recommendations on safety issues within the forest industry, and adheres to the following principles of operation:

- Impartiality in all respects, both in practice and in perception of practice;
- Fair and timely process;
- Confidentiality for companies and workers in order to identify real safety problems and find workable solutions to these safety problems; and
- Coordination of action given the number of other organizations involved in safety in British Columbia; in particular the Ombudsman will work closely with WorkSafeBC given its mandate to enhance safety in British Columbia.

The BC Forest Safety Council established the Ombudsman Office in re-

sponse to a record year of fatalities in the industry. In 2005, forty-three workers died in forest-related accidents. Industry workers, independent contractors, small firms, industry associations, and licensees were expressing concerns that raising safety issues might negatively impact their employment, small business, or ability to access permits. As well, the relative inequality of size and influence of parties within the sector made the raising and discussion of safety issues difficult. It was clear these were barriers to having frank, candid conversations about the operational and safety issues plaguing the industry. Whether these concerns were real or not, a code of silence existed about safety issues in the industry and there was a need to address this if real progress to improving safety was going to be achieved.

The Ombudsman Office has been an attempt to reach that objective by encouraging the discussion of safety within the forest industry, placing a pre-

mium on confidentiality, and by ensuring that individuals or groups who come forward to raise issues are not exposed or penalized for their actions. The Forest Safety Ombudsman has a clear mandate to investigate safety issues and recommend the best means to address them. The Ombudsman will use review, recommendation, mediation and conciliation where necessary and will also rely on international experience and leading examples of success to inform the process. Since 2006, more than 200 individuals and groups have contacted the Ombudsman Office with safety concerns.

The Ombudsman Office also takes an active role in BC Forest Safety Council initiatives such as the Faller Technical Advisory Committee, which is continuing to refine the training and certification requirements for both fallers and faller supervisors, and also conducts major reviews on identified issues. To date, the Office has published a number of reports:




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- **Not Out of the Woods:** This report takes a critical look at certification, recruitment and retention of workers in the forest sector.
- **No Longer the Road Less Travelled:** This report is a review of resource roads across the province and includes recommendations, which were subsequently endorsed by the Forest Practices Board, on the adoption of a new category of resource roads in BC. The report also provides some recommendations on how to deal with cycle times, which is an issue that continues to provide challenges for the industry.
- **Review of Failures Leading to Khaira Incident:** This report investigates safety in silviculture camps, and focuses in particular on the “Khaira incident”, a camp where workers—primarily new Canadians—were subjected to unsafe, substandard, and at times abusive living conditions. The report fun-

damentally tries to address the following question, which is: “How, despite all of the evidence that appears to have existed and been documented by various regulatory bodies against Khaira, could a workplace contracted by government deteriorate to the point where workers needed to be rescued?”

- **Report on SAFE Companies:** At the request of the Forest Council’s Board of Directors, the Ombudsman Office undertook a review of the SAFE Companies program (SCP), after numerous issues were identified by contractors, sub-contractors and owner-operators that presented serious challenges to the implementation of the program. The report includes seven recommendations aimed at strengthening the SCP, all of which were subsequently adopted by the BCFSC.

I’ve been BC’s Forest Safety Ombudsman since the position was created in

2006. I have experience in many areas of the forest sector. I have worked as a dishwasher in a logging camp, been a board member for a Local of the IWA, and owned and operated my own phase logging contract business. I know first-hand the importance of safety and the impact that injuries and fatalities can have on workers and their families. In 1986, while working as a falling contractor, my right hand was nearly severed when my chainsaw kicked back. My brother-in-law was killed in a forestry accident at age 18.

If you have a safety concern that you don’t feel comfortable addressing directly, please contact me here:

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Toll Free: 1-877-577-7766



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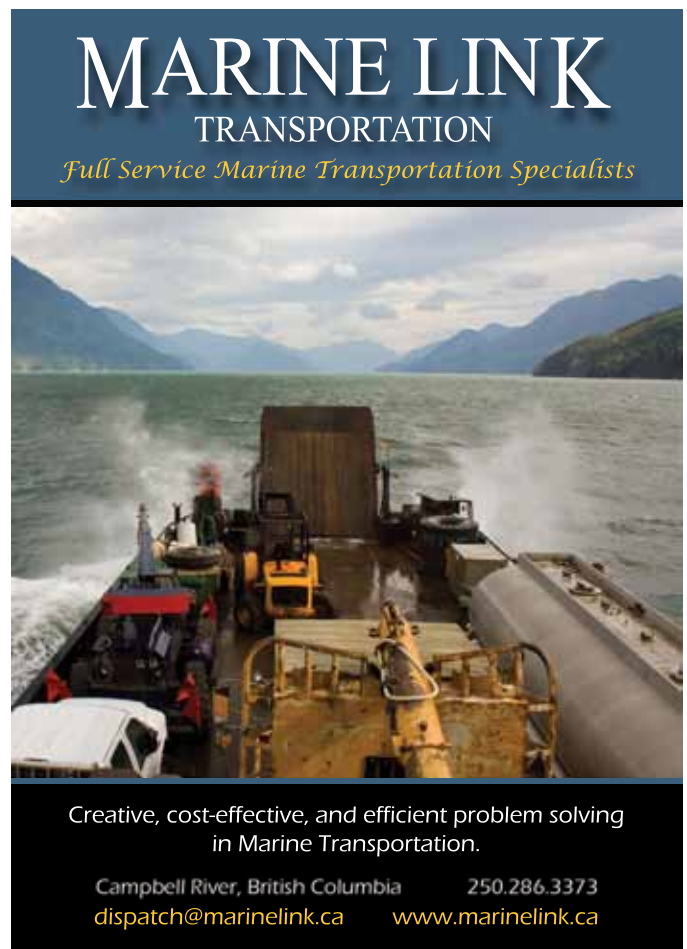
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