

## ABITIBI CONSOLIDATED

Mackenzie, BC

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### Sawmill cuts injury rates

Abitibi Consolidated's wood products division in Mackenzie was having a lot of injuries – tendonitis, shoulders, backs – and had seen a few very serious accidents at its Northern B.C. sawmill. In 1999, they became part of WCB's Focus Firm Strategy and started down the road to creating an effective health and safety program.

"Previously, we had safety on our title but we didn't actually have safety as a working program, not to the extent that it should have been in a mill this size," says Clint Desrosiers, a safety technician and union representative at Abitibi. "We didn't have a return-to-work program, we didn't look at ergonomics or do vibration or noise analysis."

It didn't take mill management long to commit to a business plan to improve occupational health and safety (OHS). WCB safety and hygiene officers worked closely with the mill's joint committee to develop their OHS program and get the program onto the mill floor for its 400 employees.

"Abitibi did a program review and worked to put a good health and safety program in place," says Kerry Douglas, WCB occupational safety officer in the Northern B.C. region. "They developed a very good claims and disability management program that is helping reduce the number of lost time accidents. They're actively looking at jobs that have potential for musculoskeletal injuries (MSI), doing risk assessment, identification and control. And now they are achieving their injury rate targets for the mill."

Abitibi's human resources manager, Jack Beck, says the mill has really benefited from the Focus Firm Strategy's emphasis on accident prevention and risk assessments. Since becoming a focus firm, the sawmill has experienced a sharp reduction in time-loss claims. In 2000 there were only seven time-loss claims, compared to 31 claims in 1996.

"We now spend a lot of time showing people how to prevent strains and sprains," says Beck. "We've got more awareness on the part of the employees."

Desrosiers illustrates these changes by describing new work procedures put into place for lumber grading to prevent strains. "Previously, we had five people standing on a table flipping wood over and marking it with a pencil," he says. "They did this quickly averaging about 30 boards a minute. Doing this repetitive activity all day long day in and day out, can cause deterioration in wrist, elbow and shoulder joints. The company has now eliminated that part of the job. Workers sit in a chair and push buttons, and the control panel is ergonomically set up so there's no strain to the wrist, fingers or other joints."

Abitibi's OHS committee has been educating employees about injury prevention issues that are directly floor-related, and encourages workers to look out for fellow employees. "We're asking workers to be responsible for each other, instead of a supervisor always having to stand over your back," says Desrosiers.

Beck notes that challenges in the lumber industry have sometimes taken the focus off safety. "The challenge for us was to keep the focus on working safely no matter what the market conditions were or what production stresses and strains we had," he says.

And it's started to pay off for Abitibi. "Being a focus firm, having WCB involved and getting us refocused on the safety issues in our mills has helped us pay attention to the cost of safety," says Beck. "It's just a matter of keeping the focus on the goal of sending everyone home at the end of the day the same way they came to work."

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