

Safety thrives in the 'pumpkin patch' at this OSB mill

"Watch" is the key word at the oriented strandboard mill, run by Ainsworth Lumber Co. Ltd. in 100 Mile House, for young workers and those training and supervising them.

The newcomers watch and learn from experienced hands, who in turn watch carefully that young workers follow correct work procedures, according to Safety/Environmental Manager Don Martin. Finally and always, he says, "Everyone looks out for everybody else."

"That's the culture here. There are no stupid safety questions, and safety concerns are addressed immediately."

For young workers, roughly a quarter of the mill's employees, it all starts with a one-day orientation and being issued personal protective equipment and hi-vis orange coveralls. Their group nickname then becomes "pumpkins" for the six months needed to earn the blue coveralls worn by regular employees.

"We hammer in on safety from the beginning," says Martin. WorkSafeBC's *Lost Youth* video introduces discussions of how easily injuries can occur throughout the mill. "It raises the hair on the backs of their necks. We don't pull any punches because these young men and women are coming into a new and dangerous industrial environment."

Survival is the goal of the instruction that comes next. It covers the mill generally and specific areas where young workers can be assigned. Everything from working in confined spaces to lockout procedures is recorded in the individual safety booklet everyone carries.

Instruction also focuses on correct work procedures for Ainsworth's standard entry-level work assignment, the finishing area. After one day paired with experienced workers there, the "pumpkins" are back in the classroom asking a lot of questions about tasks, risks and how to deal with them. Then it's a month of day shifts on all finishing area processes, with co-workers monitoring and documenting the newcomers' performance.

The next step is integration into the mill's regular work force. Safety is the watchword; team leaders audit individuals' with safe work verification forms, and everyone undergoes an annual review of correct work practices.

From the first day's orientation, through training, and afterward, "we scrutinize young workers more closely," according to Martin. "It's a matter of the kind of people they tend to be."

Being eager to prove themselves can be dangerous, although the young worker thinks, "Maybe I'll get a pat on the back if I do that." Martin makes sure they understand that. We appreciate it much more if we hear them say, "Can you come and see if this needs doing."

Asking questions or admitting uncertainty isn't easy, so we remind them until they're probably sick and tired of hearing us say, "Ask questions."

As for young Ainsworth workers whose youth may create a sense of invincibility, Martin doesn't see many because the hiring process delivers "level-headed individuals" and the mill training keeps them on track.

"But it's important to reinforce the training every day with monitoring and communication that makes them feel part of the family," says Martin.

"Too many young workers are hurt, and I knock on wood that we've never hurt a "pumpkin" seriously, never sent one home for a lockout violation. The reason is the extra time and effort all of our employees put into safety. But you've always got to be there watching."