

CELTIC REFORESTATION



The root of the issue in keeping young workers safe

Growing from 16 to more than 350 permanent and seasonal employees and planting 230 million seedlings since 1984 — those are two measures of Celtic Reforestation's history.

But co-owner Dave Wilson believes neither counts more than recording only one serious injury in 22 years, a camp cook burned by boiling water. Today, the Prince-George-based company sees one or two relatively-minor injuries a month, typically repetitive strains.

“Safety isn't number one, but nothing is more important,” says Wilson. “Safety and production are equally important, and they don't preclude one another. Even inherently dangerous work can be made safer.”

Those can be tough words to do business by — especially with a work force comprised mainly of young workers doing physically-demanding jobs. From Vancouver Island to central and northern B.C., they put in four-days-on and one-day-off, and can stay in bush camps as long as three months.

The youthful sense of personal invincibility is a key focus of the company's safety training. Celtic teaches young people to think about what could go wrong, and how it might impact the rest of their lives or their co-workers' lives.

The greatest silviculture risks are in driving to and from work, according to Wilson. “The potential for serious injuries in vehicle accidents outweighs all other risks combined.” So Celtic developed an Off-Highway Driving Program. “I sleep better knowing all our employees are trained to recognize vehicle safety as their most important safety concern.”

Company employees also receive training in forestry issues like wild animal safety, emergency evacuation procedures, helicopter safety, nutrition and human energy ergonomics to avoid exhaustion.

Celtic emphasizes hazard recognition, assessment and abatement, giving some ownership of the process to young workers and “training them to be inspectors,” according to Wilson. The message is: Look around; spot the potential hazards; do something to reduce or eliminate them, and report them to your supervisor so we can find ways to work around them safely.

“Many first-time planters start without much bush experience, often lacking in maturity and with their hands out expecting to be taken care of. It’s a big reward, seeing the amazing transformation as they mature and take responsibility for themselves after a month in the field.”

Leadership is critical, and Celtic’s commitment to safety is embraced by everyone from Wilson and company co-owner Rory Wing to front-line supervisors. “Our health and safety program is much more than a directive from head office”.

Wilson says young workers are “generally non-institutional people” for whom top-down corporate messages don’t work. “You need to involve them in establishing safety procedures, to challenge them to take responsibility for one other’s safety — so everyone goes home in one piece at the end of the day.

“It’s not just safety. Positive reinforcement comes 1,500 to 2,000 times a day at 15 cents a tree. Safety and production go together,” he says. “If you’re injured, you can’t do what you came to the woods to do. They make the link between that and safety.”

Wilson also owns a small resort and knows it’s possible to make the same connection for young hourly-paid employees. The root of the issue, he says, is “demonstrating how earning a living depends on safety, and that it won’t impede their ability to make money.”