

# West Fraser Timber



## *Giving young worker safety the attention it deserves*

While overhauling its company-wide health and safety program in late 2004, West Fraser Mills Ltd. targeted preventing young worker injuries as a major objective, according to Quesnel-based Corporate Safety Manager Kerry Douglas.

“The idea was to develop and implement new guidelines for young worker training and supervision, different from that given to experienced workers,” he says, “and it was approved by our CEO and three operating vice presidents.”

Today the guidelines apply to 19 West Fraser operations in B.C., nine operations in Alberta and two in the United States.

Each local operation can put its own twist on the corporate guidelines, but they all use the same basic template. Across the board, this makes young worker safety one of the company’s leading safety priorities. The others are lockout, confined spaces, fall protection, and mobile equipment.

“You need to take ‘small steps’ with many young workers who don’t have a lot of life experience,” Douglas explains. “We try to focus on how risk-taking behaviours can be reflected in at-work behaviours.” He points to the example of one young worker who climbed onto a moving sawmill waste conveyor and pretended to be an ocean surfer. Luckily, he didn’t wipe out.

The West Fraser training process begins with an orientation that usually consists of the division manager sitting down with newly-hired young workers and clarifying “our expectations of their behaviours,” according to Douglas. Then for at least the first six weeks, supervisors monitor the newcomers, documenting work practices and job daily. This is central to “a great deal of training and education” geared to young workers.

Keeping a careful eye on young workers can take longer, of course, depending on the individual and the type of operation. They all wear specially coloured gear for a minimum of six months to one year on the job — hard hats in sawmills and hi-vis vests at sites where hard hats aren't used.

Douglas cites three points that deserve special attention when dealing with young worker safety.

1. "Typically, the industry has used canned packages for orientation that may work well for experienced workers, but won't necessarily do the job with young workers. We can't use the same training techniques with them."
2. "It's important to look at the tasks young workers generally do and the hazards they encounter as a result," says Douglas. This can range from simple prevention of repetitive strain injuries by monitoring an individual's ergonomics, to the more serious step of deciding that the company will no longer assign young workers to some jobs, "which expose the worker to high hazard situations."
3. Douglas also points out that the thought process used to supervise experienced workers doesn't work as well for young workers. "They need more concentrated supervision, and more of it. This is the key, key point."

"Working through the challenges, everything comes down to supervision, education and training. We've tried to build on all three elements to the point where young workers can work in West Fraser mills without getting hurt."