

FARMER CONSTRUCTION



A solid foundation to keep young workers safe

As the economy booms, the construction industry has become more favourable for young people choosing trades careers. The boom has also created opportunities for Farmer Construction Ltd. This 55-year-old family-owned general contracting company builds solidly on its safety tradition, especially where young workers are concerned.

“If your company’s worked in a safe manner for generations, then you inherit that as commonplace. My father, brother and I are journeymen carpenters; and two of our sons are apprentice carpenters. Safety has become inherent,” says Lyle Scroggs, the Victoria firm’s vice president and general superintendent.

Farmer Construction Ltd. works in all types of construction projects in areas of Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland and throughout B.C. The union company employs approximately 150 outside workers, mainly carpenters and labourers. More than a quarter are younger than 24 years, including at least 15 pre-apprentices, 25 apprentices and a handful of journeymen.

After an initial assessment at orientation, Scroggs tries to put new young workers in “low hazard areas” such as project start-ups, assembly areas and other less-active locations. Some journeymen may fall into this category if they have limited work experience.

Each pre-apprentice is mentored by an experienced worker for at least three months or “until we feel they’ve got it,” Scroggs says. “Some pick up skills and understand safe work procedures quickly, but they still need to work under supervision. We watch them pretty closely.” He notes that about 40 per cent drop out during their mentorships.

The next step sees young workers enter the formal four-year apprenticeship system, and Farmer Construction maintains its emphasis on job site safety. As skill shortages bring more young workers into the construction industry, Scroggs sees a few issues specific to them.

Questions: “We expect young workers to know nothing, but they must give us their best effort and ask questions when they don’t understand,” he says. “We always observe them closely and try to encourage them to ask questions, to clarify what’s at hand.”

Work Ethic: “Not in all cases, but generally, young people don’t seem to have the work ethic of earlier generations, especially when it comes to attendance and focus,” says Scroggs. “If young workers are missing time, we better be watching them, because their minds are somewhere else. And in this industry they must be alert at all times.”

Invincibility: “It’s not OK with Farmer Construction to have people who aren’t working in a safe manner because they believe nothing can happen to them. Nobody’s invincible. We’ll talk to them, and let them know that attitude can’t continue. If it does, we won’t have them; I’ll let them go.”

“Farmer Construction and WorkSafeBC are on the same team, and our goal is to keep young workers safe,” according to Scroggs.

The company’s standard procedure is to invite WorkSafeBC safety officers to project sites when they begin. “We also invite them to superintendent’s meetings; they have great ideas – such as giving apprentices more ownership of site safety by having them do toolbox talks.”

But ultimately, according to Scroggs, nothing dilutes “our responsibility to ensure that our employees of all ages are working safely. That’s what it all comes down to.”