

A woman, Jassy Mann, is working in a large greenhouse. She is wearing a dark green long-sleeved shirt, blue safety glasses, and blue gloves. She is focused on a tray of cannabis plants in front of her. The plants are in black trays and have green, serrated leaves. In the background, there are more trays of plants and yellow hanging tags. The greenhouse has a high ceiling with metal beams and lights.

On the cover

Jassy Mann, supervisor, production, at Pure Sunfarms sticking cuttings — a method used to propagate plants.

Growing a safety culture from the ground up

By Jesse Marchand

When Pure Sunfarms started growing cannabis, it was the perfect opportunity to grow health and safety culture at the same time.

The recreational cannabis industry has sprouted since legalization in October of 2018 — today, B.C. has around 65 licensed cultivators, processors, and sellers under Health Canada Cannabis Regulations, some with licences for multiple locations. This rapid growth coupled with competition to get a share in this marketplace has the potential to leave worker health and safety at the bottom of the priority pile.

Some employers, however, see the new market as an opportunity to build a dream workplace from the ground up — one that includes injury prevention and a worker's right to a healthy and safe workplace.

WorkSafeBC's Risk Analysis Unit (RAU) sees it as an opportunity, too. As part of its commitment to understand and prevent emerging risks, the RAU has been working with other departments at WorkSafeBC to engage with employers on their health and safety programs. It was through one of these engagements, that WorkSafeBC occupational hygiene officer Kimiko Banati first met health and safety manager Robert Clark and the Pure Sunfarms team.

"When I first visited Pure Sunfarms, their health and safety manager, Robert Clark, had only been on the job for two weeks. But Robert had hit the ground running and was already building on health and safety systems," says Banati.



Elaine McAnally, Robert Clark, and Chantelle Dovale, supervisor, post-harvest production, discuss health and safety in a flower room.

"The facility had already thought through their engineering systems and set up a sanitization process. They had a really good health and safety system set up in such a short time, and were already thinking proactively about worker health and safety."

Elaine McAnally, Pure Sunfarm's VP, people and experience, notes that what made them able to deliver health and safety needs quickly was making it part of their growth plan from day one. "We were a small, dedicated team in the early days," says McAnally. "Our health and safety program was always a priority for everyone and is a core part of our culture."

An enthusiastic committee

Pure Sunfarms employs 100 full-time employees and over 400 contractors to grow and process eight strains of dried cannabis flower. To keep things running smoothly, safe work processes, documentation, and clear lines of communication are a must.

"Employees are involved in health and safety every step of the way," notes Clark. "Whenever we do a risk assessment, they are involved. We don't just take information to health and safety meetings. We include the team right from the start."

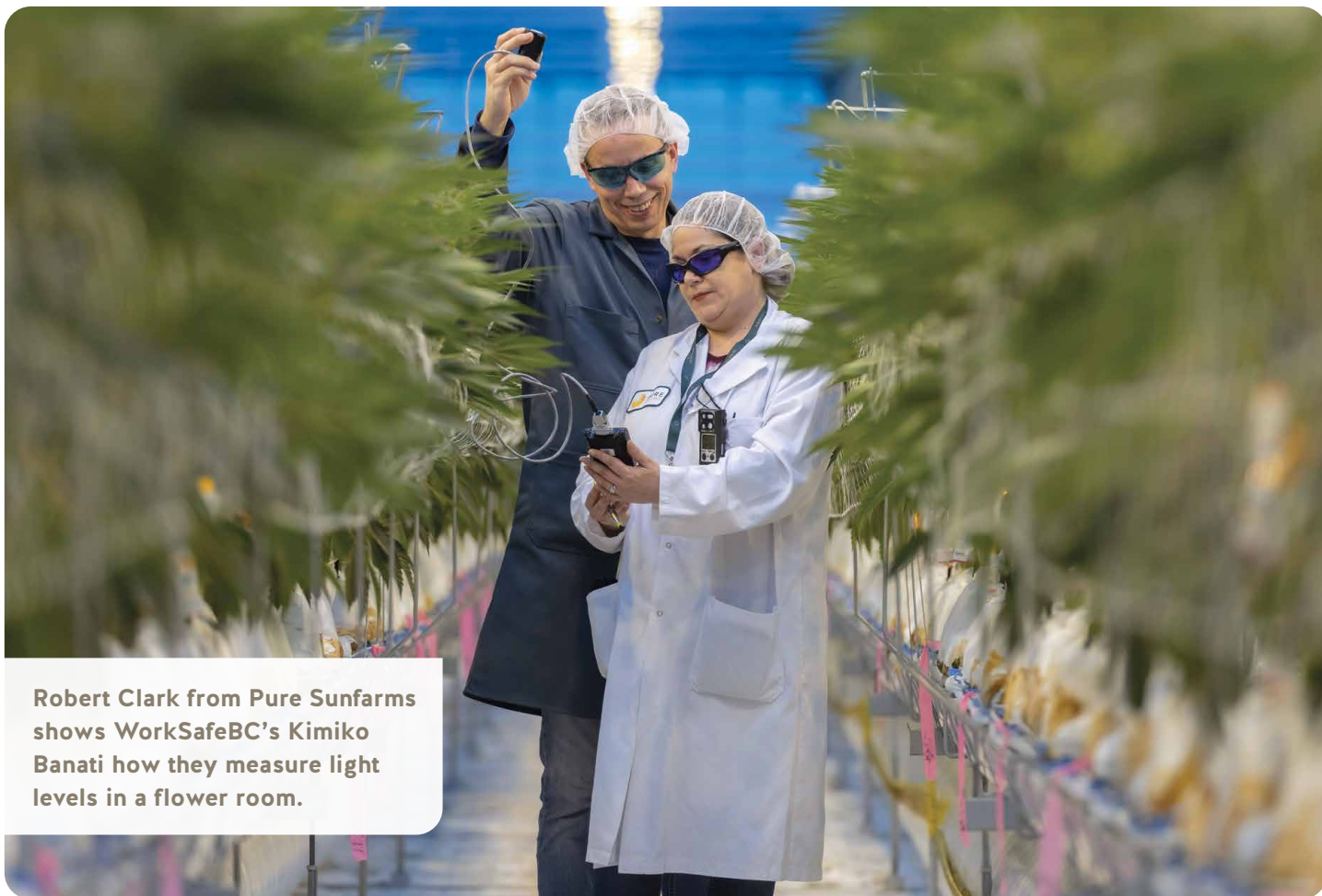
Employees have several avenues for reporting hazards, including talking directly to the joint health and safety committee, emailing a dedicated email address, or raising the issue in Slack, a communications channel for employees. Because it takes two to three full days to complete an inspection of the entire facility, the joint committee also rotates the areas where they perform monthly inspections.

Through it all, the joint committee is particularly engaged in making the workplace as safe as possible, says Clark. "I've worked at places where it's really hard to get a committee going. Here, people are enthusiastic about it. They appreciate it."

For McAnally, the success of the committee comes down to leaders leading leaders. "Robert is one person, but what he's done is teach the health and safety committee to be able to take on these tasks. He's taken the role of one health and safety manager and amplified that many times."

Working closely with vendors

Another way he is amplifying his role is bringing in experts early and often. This includes connecting with equipment vendors, engineers, ergonomists, and



Robert Clark from Pure Sunfarms shows WorkSafeBC's Kimiko Banati how they measure light levels in a flower room.

emergency response personnel. When it comes to equipment, connecting with vendors has become an important step in preventing injury.

While growing and harvesting cannabis has some similarities with hot house vegetables, there is a unique set of processes and needs when it comes to equipment. Some equipment may come from the local agriculture industry, while other equipment comes from the United States or Europe, meaning it may not conform to CSA standards.

“Robert is working quite a bit with safeguarding,” says Banati. “They are doing proper assessments of what safeguards are in place. All employers need to make sure their equipment meets lockout and safeguard requirements. They need to do that assessment for the safety of the workers and implement effective controls.”

To safeguard the equipment, the team at Pure Sunfarms utilizes every resource available — including the equipment vendors.

“We have a dedicated team of process engineers who specialize in the set-up and design of equipment. Since the cannabis industry is so new, the trim machines, the bucking machines, and the grinders are very new equipment,” notes Clark.

“One of the most important things we’ve implemented is including the vendors in our risk assessments. I can’t stress this enough: A lot of equipment shipped in from outside of Canada is designed to different standards,” says Clark. “Before it’s put on the floor, we spend time with the vendor, engineers, and our operations team to develop the guarding and our health and safety procedures around the equipment.”

Shutting down CO2

Along with vendors, the health and safety team also connects with emergency response teams. A good example is their control plan for carbon dioxide (CO₂), which many facilities use to enrich growth. “To use it safely, there needs to be a monitoring system in place, as well as emergency plans for unforeseen events,” notes Banati. “Employers need to understand the risks

and hazards associated with CO2 and put in adequate, reliable, and durable controls in consultation with their local fire department, Technical Safety BC, and their joint health and safety committee.”

In addition to failsafe’s such as automatic monitoring and remote shut-off systems, Pure Sunfarm puts careful consideration into its workplace procedures in conjunction with emergency response personnel.

“Regular visits to our site are conducted by the local fire department and fire prevention services to ensure familiarity with our procedures and facility in case of emergency,” says Clark. The team has also implemented signage in the languages of their workforce — English, Punjabi, and Spanish — to ensure workers are familiar with and have access to safety procedures.

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—Robert Clark, health and safety manager,
Pure Sunfarms

Taking out the strain

Procedures and signage are just part of the picture. When it comes to eliminating injury, Pure Sunfarms looks at how workstations are set up, how equipment is purchased and safeguarded, how product is transported, and everything in between.

The set-up of the workspace is an important factor when it comes to preventing musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) to workers. If stool heights can’t be adjusted to match plant height, workers could be hunched over with necks bent in awkward postures. The trimming itself could also be a risk for MSIs: improperly set up workstations can lead to wrist extension, while the grip strength required to trim and snip buds could put tendons at risk. Assessing the risk and switching out the tools for safer options can go a long way in preventing injury.

WorkSafeBC ergonomists Gina Vahlas, Heather Kahle, and Tami Perkins have been accompanying prevention officers to local cannabis facilities to understand the

musculoskeletal risk factors for workers in this industry. What they’ve seen at Pure Sunfarms is encouraging, when it comes to preventing MSIs.

Stool heights are adjustable and workstations are cleared of clutter that could cause tripping injuries. To increase morale and productivity, workers rotate their tasks and take stretch breaks. They also pay close to attention to the travel path of the product, from clearing pathways to reducing repetitive motions in moving materials.

They are also cautious about how far workers need to carry product and supplies and have removed the risk of needing to repeatedly transport items up and down stairs — a risk that the WorkSafeBC ergonomists have seen at other facilities.

“If a facility is adding a second floor, they should build in a mechanical lift to move materials between the floors, instead of expecting workers to manually carry items up and down stairs,” notes Vahlas.

Assessing work procedures and building in solutions is at the heart of Pure Sunfarms’ MSI prevention program. The team’s special relationship with vendors is key.

“Their work with the vendors to perform risk assessments on equipment is the most important prevention tool they have when it comes to preventing MSIs,” says Kahle. “Recognizing problems early and making effective workplace changes is key to reducing the risk of injury.”

A team effort

For Clark, the bottom line is that the whole team is on board with their efforts. “Everyone takes health and safety seriously. People come to me with ideas saying ‘Can we do this and can we do that?’ They are not afraid to report hazards or injuries.” It’s a positive step, considering that early reporting is key to understanding where problems may emerge.

“This is the best job I’ve ever had,” adds Clark. “The support I get from my colleagues makes it easy to do health and safety in this environment.”

For more information

For more information on health and safety in the cannabis or agriculture industry, visit our website at worksafebc.com. To find more information on implementing an effective agricultural safety program, visit agsafebc.ca. 🌱