

On the cover

Champs Fresh Farms supervisor Hieu Ngo and safety coordinator, Lyna Huynh review equipment inspection procedures with harvesters.

Harvesting a better health and safety program

By Helena Bryan

After struggling with injuries, employee safety complaints, and multiple time-loss claims at their mushroom farm, this B.C. business did a complete overhaul of their safety program through the Program and Committee Evaluation Initiative with WorkSafeBC.

When Mike Pimlott arrived in 2018 to take over as director of operations of Fraser Valley-based Champs Fresh Farms Inc., he quickly found out he had his work cut out for him.

On day one of the job, he met with fellow new hire, director of health and safety David Nguyen, who showed him multiple WorkSafeBC orders recently issued to the company for a variety of health and safety violations.

Pimlott also learned that from 2015 to 2018, the company had 82 inspection reports from WorkSafeBC, and had accumulated 69 violations. It caused him to question the effectiveness of their health and safety program and related activities.

The health and safety stats for 2018 were equally concerning: 25 time-loss claims, 1,350 work days lost to injury, and a claims cost of \$250,000, about 1.1 percent of the payroll.

Risks in mushroom farming

Pimlott knew that big changes were necessary, especially given the risks associated with the agriculture industry. Workers often use mobile equipment, conveyors, and platforms or ladders on the job, and they are vulnerable to falls from elevation, being struck by equipment or machinery, and slipping and tripping hazards, among others.

Workers also face potential exposure to hazards arising from the composting process. In 2008, a Langley mushroom farm, unrelated to Champs, made headlines when three workers died from exposure to toxic gases in the confined space of a utility shed; two others who went to their aid suffered life-altering brain injuries. This tragedy led to a wake-up call for the industry as a whole when it comes to confined spaces. Today, many farms keep workers completely out of confined spaces and Champs is no exception.

A concentrated effort

It would take Pimlott and Nguyen close to two years of focused effort — and considerable consultation with WorkSafeBC's Program and Committee Evaluation (PACE) Initiative — to overcome the deep-seated problems they'd inherited.

The PACE initiative was created to help employers and workers improve the functionality of workplace safety programs and joint health and safety committees. "PACE engages employers to reach beyond the basic requirements of a joint committee, to prevent injuries. We provide the tools, support, and motivation needed to create a well-functioning program," says Mike Nielsen, manager, Prevention Field Services at WorkSafeBC. On average, nearly 100 employers have participated in the program each year since it was rolled out in 2017.

The turning point

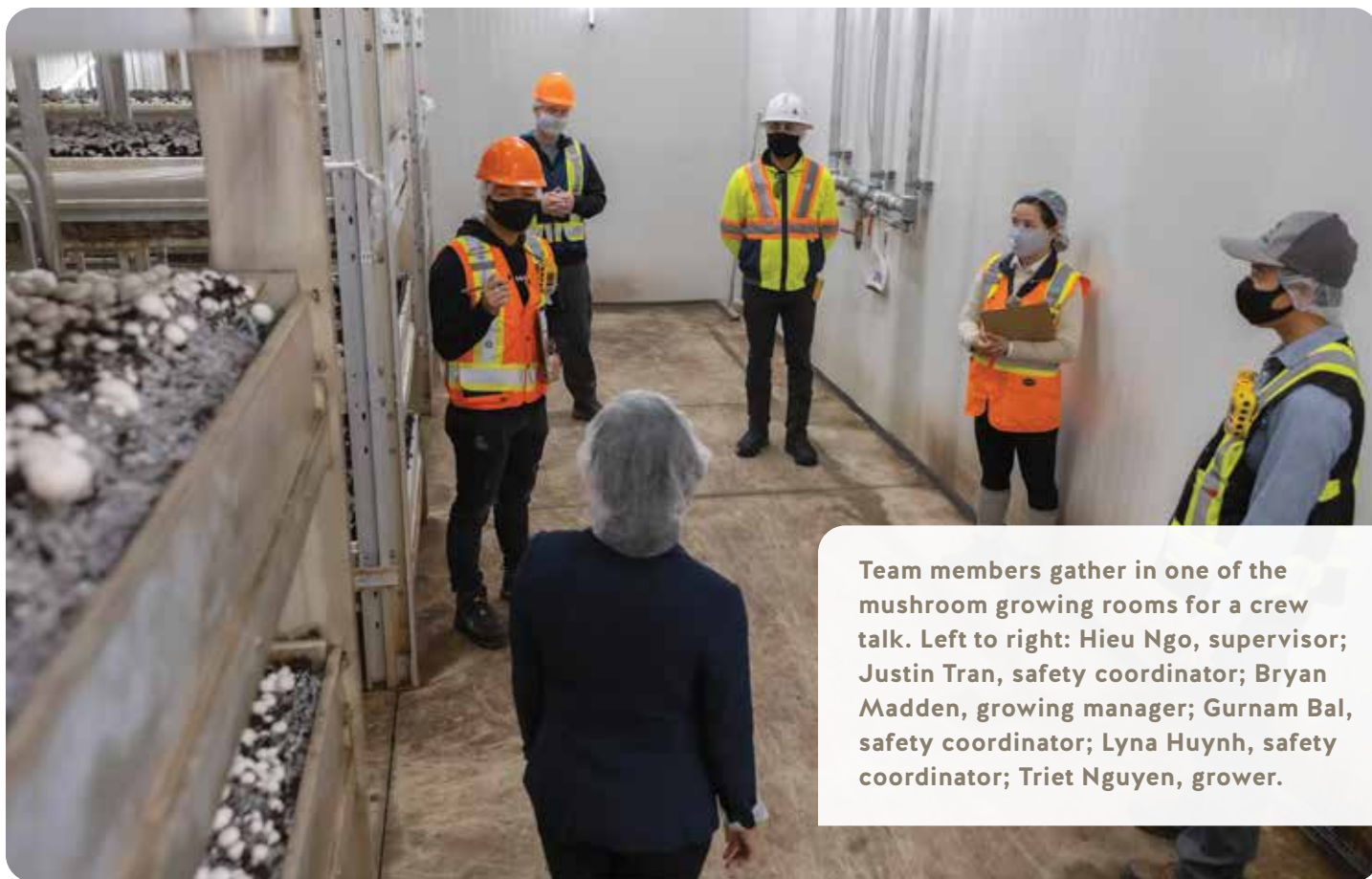
Pimlott's first move was to meet with WorkSafeBC. "I came to B.C. with a safety background and David has huge health and safety expertise. I knew we could handle this two ways: push back at the health and safety regulator and be prepared for the costs that would inevitably result. Or engage with WorkSafeBC and invest in our health and safety program."

Pimlott chose the latter.

Nguyen knew Mike Nielsen from his days as a safety advisor at AgSafe. AgSafe is the association that provides health and safety consultation, education, training, and resources to agriculture employers.

Nguyen put Pimlott and Nielsen in touch with each other and they met to go over the numbers. "We'd been spending a lot of time with this one employer and a lot of the orders issued were for repeated violations," says Nielsen. "We were actually in the process of considering sanctions against Champs, but we'd had a lot of prior success with PACE, and it was at that meeting that we all recognized the benefits that could come from Champs participating in the program."

"You can spend a lot of money on a safety management system that doesn't meet the health and safety regulator's requirements," says Pimlott. "I'd rather work with the regulator to get it right the first time. This is why we volunteered for the PACE program."



Team members gather in one of the mushroom growing rooms for a crew talk. Left to right: Hieu Ngo, supervisor; Justin Tran, safety coordinator; Bryan Madden, growing manager; Gurnam Bal, safety coordinator; Lyna Huynh, safety coordinator; Triet Nguyen, grower.

The self-audit

The PACE process started with WorkSafeBC and senior officials of Champs sitting down to commit to the program. “This was accompanied with an Employer Self-Perception Audit, to get a feel for where we thought we were at, in regards to our safety program and activities,” says Nguyen. “Once the required documents were shared and a site inspection was conducted, we conducted a gap analysis together — a way of looking at where the gaps in a health and safety system are. This gave us our path moving forward,” adds Nielsen.

The audit was revealing and highlighted the immediate need for a cultural changes, says Pimlott.

Employee engagement

Over the next months, Pimlott and Nguyen, with the support of Nielsen and PACE, worked to fill those gaps. They created health and safety committees for all Champs locations — the compost production facility, the farms, and the packing operation — and engaged workers in the development of safe work procedures,

as well as in conducting risk assessments and investigations.

“Engaging our employees was key,” says Pimlott. “They know the jobs and they know the practical applications of health and safety procedures. And if they have input into those, they’re far more likely to abide by them.”

The effectiveness of the new approach is reflected in the dwindling number of orders since September 2018: violations are now at zero, and inspection reports were now related to the PACE process rather than health and safety infractions.

Other stats also speak volumes: 8 time-loss claims in 2020 to date, compared to 25 in 2018; 360 work days lost year-to-date, compared to 1,350 in 2018; and a claims cost of \$32,000 year-to-date, compared to \$250,000 in 2018 (0.1 percent of payroll compared to 1.1 percent in 2018).

Full leadership support

WorkSafeBC director Darrin McCaskill, who leads the PACE initiative, credits Champs’ new leadership team for the turnaround. “Improved health and safety



WorkSafeBC occupational safety officers Brian Wiens and Sigfrido Castro Vivas meet with Champs Fresh Farms director of health and safety David Nguyen, growing manager Bryan Madden, and director of operations Mike Pimlott.

performance begins with workplace leadership. A foundational piece of the PACE program is employer leadership, as evidenced through their commitment and support. It's clear that the PACE program had full support. I give them full credit for a job well done."

Nielsen agrees. "Health and safety was clearly a priority for Mike and David. They were the turning point. They had a lot of work to do to shift the culture to a point where workers were comfortable raising health and safety concerns. They didn't just sit in an office writing procedures on paper. Mike does a weekly walkabout and he's always looking for long-term solutions based on employee feedback. He's also willing to set aside the budget for engineering solutions."

After Champs had completed the PACE initiative, Pimlott and Nguyen sat down with Nielsen and the WorkSafeBC team and shared the learnings from their PACE experience, as well as showing off the positive numbers.

Says Nielsen: "That meeting made me realize that you put the right officers with the right employers and it's a win-win. It was one of the best meetings I've had with an employer — and one of the happiest days I've had at WorkSafeBC."

Nguyen and Pimlott remember the meeting well. "The best reward was seeing the grin on Mike's face," Pimlott says. "As a matter of fact, I think he ran out of the room to phone some of his colleagues and share with them what we'd achieved. It usually takes a company three to five years to develop a health and safety program like the one we now have. PACE accelerated that. We wouldn't have been able to do what we did, in the time we did it, without the help and support we received through the program."

After nearly two years of close collaboration with Champs, Nielsen still reflects fondly on the engagement and says he misses the interaction with them. "We have maintained the relationship, although there hasn't been a need to be in regular contact with them anymore. And that's a good thing because, after all, a compliant and sustainable health and safety program is the ultimate goal of the PACE initiative."

For more information

To find out more about the PACE initiative visit worksafebc.com and search for "PACE." For more about agricultural safety visit agsafebc.ca. ☎