

Tarping loads like these can lead to injuries. Preventing them is a focus for the Wood Fibre Hauling Safety Group.

Wood fibre haulers tackle high injury rates

By Tom Ruffen

Putting competition aside, the Wood Fibre Hauling Safety Group is bringing industry together to tackle the tough problem of high injury rates.

Drivers in the wood fibre hauling industry are at risk for musculoskeletal injuries, which most often occur when pulling or rolling tarps and ropes over trailers to secure each bulk load. Until recently, the task of tarping has been done manually in most chip-hauling operations and in all kinds of environmental conditions, including snow and ice, which can increase the risk of a slip and fall.

“Shoulders are the biggest injury problem, and they generally require surgeries and several months off from work,” says Annie Horning, CEO of the Prince George-based Excel Group, which includes Excel Transportation.

“It’s a huge drain on the driver pool that we have. It’s also very expensive. We’ve seen our insurance premiums skyrocket, so in 2014 we engaged with the BC Forest Safety Council to set up a meeting with various haulers and invited several industry support

groups to create a solution.” The outcome of those discussions was the Bulk Hauler Injury Elimination Taskforce.

The high cost of tarping injuries

In 2017, the taskforce hired a research firm to better understand tarping-related injuries and the available solutions. Their findings showed that 60 percent of all injuries occurred while tarping. The report included WorkSafeBC statistics indicating the average claim cost per year for tarping injuries exceeded \$1.7 million.

In 2018, the taskforce expanded its membership to include several other trucking companies and evolved into the Wood Fibre Hauling Safety Group.

“It’s really an industry safety alliance focused on preventing injuries in the wood fibre hauling sector. The advancement of automatic tarping technologies has been in the forefront,” says Trish Kohorst, taskforce facilitator and BC Forest Safety Council transportation safety program manager.

Competitors became collaborators

Over the past few years, the group has seen its

members put competition aside and focus on the shared goal of making the industry a safer place to work.

“The members are very forthright and open to sharing information with a common goal of reducing injuries and improving safety,” Kohorst explains. “I’ve seen this type of co-operation in other industries and it really benefits worker safety. Competition is left at the door and details are openly shared about the various solutions members are developing.”

Because a large number of injuries come from the tasks associated with tarping loads, the safety group also reached out to a manufacturing company to develop a solution to take the physical demands out of the tarping process.

“We gave them specifications and dimensions of our trailers, as well as the regulatory compliance required from the Commercial Vehicle Safety Enforcement jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transportation,” says Kohorst. “The manufacturer made a significant investment to develop a solution, and continues to refine it after getting a lot of feedback from drivers themselves. Now a few of our members, including Excel, have implemented that technology.”

Prototyping a tarp

Excel Transportation uses automatic tarping innovations from three different manufacturers depending on the trailer involved, Horning notes. “Each system has its own mechanism. The manufacturers have fine-tuned each of them as to what will work best for our trucks and the 53-foot trailers we use to haul fibre residuals like sawdust, shavings, and bark. We now have button control on the side of the trailer itself, so the driver doesn’t have to climb a ladder. Everything can be secured from the ground. The next step for the team is to test the solution in all weather conditions. We still have all the seasonal issues to put these things through like freezing temperatures and winter weather.”

Currently, Excel has 80 to 100 trailers, but only 10 are outfitted in the latest tarping technology, according to Horning. But the company is working on adding more. “Everybody wants to have the auto-tarps because the drivers can run them even after having a shoulder injury. They can return to work sooner.”

Horning adds that the new innovations help to address chronic driver shortages in the driver industry. “We have an older workforce. People aren’t as strong as

they age, but older drivers are able to continue working longer with these auto-tarps. It creates a far greater resource pool when you can eliminate the physical demands on the drivers,” she adds.

Even though it takes a few years to get payback on the initial cost, Kohorst and Horning both say that it’s worth it. The cost of an injury, the loss of quality of life for the worker, and the increased premium costs can end up being much more than the initial investment to prevent the injuries from happening in the first place.

Kohorst estimates that there are roughly 2,000 wood fibre hauling trailers across the province with about 20 trailers now equipped with a range of different auto-tarping systems.

More than just tarping

In addition to focusing on tarping injuries, the group is also looking at other areas to improve driver safety. One of their current projects is to develop an occupational competency standard for training wood fibre truck drivers in collaboration with WorkSafeBC and Northern Development Trust.

“These employers are coming together and putting competition aside in order to make safety a priority for their drivers,” says Trina Pollard, manager in transportation for Industry and Labour Services at WorkSafeBC. “The bottom line is that no driver should have to be injured in the course of their work. This group is committed to making that a reality.”

For more information

To find out more about the Wood Fibre Hauling Safety Group, visit bcforestsafesafe.org. You can also find detailed information on transportation in forestry by searching for “forestry” on worksafefbc.com. 🗣️

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