



B.C.'s tree planters had an extra challenge this summer — COVID-19.

Planting in a pod

By Marnie Douglas

B.C.'s most ambitious tree planting season ever took root under the shadow of COVID-19. Keeping workers and communities safe from the virus became a top priority for the industry.

For the silviculture industry, 2020 was on track to be the largest tree planting year in British Columbia's history — more than 300 million seedlings were to go into the ground, an increase of 40 million over previous years, in response to insect kills, devastating wildfires, and reforestation obligations.

And then came COVID-19.

"It was a going to be a busy, challenging season for us anyway, without the COVID-19 pandemic. This was unprecedented," says Jordan Tesluk, a safety advisor with the Western Forestry Contractors' Association (WFCA), which represents the majority of tree planting companies in Western Canada.

Pandemic planning

Within hours of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a pandemic in early March, Tesluk was on the phone with forest industry leaders and discussing what needed to be done. Thankfully, he had recently done a presentation on preventing illness and spread of communicable diseases in camps.

"So we had a framework. But there were 4,600 workers across 130 worksites province-wide. And 2,000 of those workers were from out of province," he explains. "It was going to be a massive effort to get everyone on board."

The WFCA began immediately working with the provincial health officer (PHO), Ministry of Forests, WorkSafeBC, and licensees to create a plan to keep workers and communities safe — ensuring the appropriate procedures would be in place to reduce the risk and spread of COVID-19.

“Every contractor wanted this to be successful. Where we are normally competing with one another, this year companies all worked together, planned together, shared documents, and had many Zoom calls. It was impressive.”

—Robin McCullough, occupational health and safety coordinator, Brinkman Reforestation

Planting was already well underway on Vancouver Island as it typically finishes by the end of April or early May. In a normal year, planters would then move to the Southern Interior and Kootenays, followed by northern B.C. and then over to Alberta.

But in late March, B.C.’s chief forester delayed the start of the Interior planting season by two weeks to allow time for the industry to come up with a comprehensive COVID-19 plan. Although the extra time was necessary, Tesluk says it was tricky because seedlings were already thawed and there was a small window to get them into the ground. Meanwhile, employers were mobilizing crews from around Canada and abroad, booking transport, and setting up camps or securing motels.

A plan takes shape

“What they came up with was guidelines specific to COVID-19, and that was on top of the existing B.C. Centre of Disease Control guidelines for industrial camps,” explains Ramon Harpur, a Prince George-based occupational safety officer with WorkSafeBC. “It was unbelievably orchestrated.”

Planters typically arrive in the spring and spend months in the woods. As part of the new plan, planters needed to self-isolate for 14 days at home as a condition of employment. Then prior to heading to camp, workers would be screened, have completed logbooks and travel itineraries reviewed, and be observed for any symptoms and be temperature screened, says Harpur. They also had to prepare to be isolated on the journey to camp, by bringing their own snacks and pre-planning fuel stops to minimize interactions.

Central to the plan was physical distancing — whether it was workers travelling to and from camp, planting, or sharing tents. More transportation was needed than usual, so fewer people would have to travel together. Planters would only be allowed close contact with a

handful of people assigned to their “pod,” a group of 3–6 people who would eat and work together for months at a time. Each pod needed to be completely physically distanced from anyone else sharing the camp. In some cases, the pods would stay in motels, with access to individual cooking facilities and washrooms.

Isolation in the woods

According to provincial health directives, tree planters would be in “lockdown” in their remote camps, forbidden from visiting neighbouring communities on their days off. This would limit their exposure and protect those neighbouring communities.

“The orders were implemented overnight, and the contractors were compliant and on board right away,” says Branko Samoukovic, an occupational safety officer with WorkSafeBC in Courtenay. “I was impressed with the silviculture contractors — their knowledge, and how they responded to the situation.”

Other changes included no buffet-style food service in camps. Cooks would plate each meal and pre-pack lunches for planters. Extra kitchen staff were hired to accommodate the extra work and food service was provided in camp on days off. Additional facilities (showers, toilets, mess tents, laundry equipment) were added to ensure physical distancing and isolation facilities were provided for people should they become sick.

WorkSafeBC staff also had new protocols — prevention officers could only visit one tree planting facility a day and only one officer was assigned per region, so as to limit contact and possible spread.

Communication was key

“Communication and collaboration between so many people allowed this all to happen,” Robin McCullough, occupational health and safety coordinator with Brinkman Reforestation, says proudly. “People were

very grateful in the field for the program that was put together but the truth is, it was the people in the field who implemented it and ensured that everyone stayed safe.”

The biggest challenge? Aside from figuring out how to pay for all the extra vehicles, food, and staff, was ensuring planters could handle working in isolation.

“No question. It was challenging for the planters to be isolated for so long. Some were barely 19 years old, had never planted before, and found it really tough to be with the same people day and night for three or four months and not be able to leave for a break,” McCullough says. “Some areas had no wi-fi or it was very limited.” But there were upsides too: planters got lots of rest and, for companies like Brinkman who supplied food to the camps, food costs were much lower as the planters didn’t have to buy their own food in town.

But key she says, was the resilience shown by everyone involved — from planters to contractors to

everyone in the industry and up to government.

“Every contractor wanted this to be successful. Where we are normally competing with one another, this year companies all worked together, planned together, shared documents, and had many Zoom calls. It was impressive.”

Like McCullough, Tesluk says success would not have been possible without buy-in from everyone involved. “It was more than guidelines and rules, this was a very social experiment. It was an incredible effort on everyone’s behalf to make the season happen.”

So far, the future of safety for tree planters is looking bright as well, says Budd Phillips, WorkSafeBC manager, Prevention Field Services. “There have been no significant serious injuries with tree planters this year and overall camp conditions were improved with better sanitation measures and food service,” says Phillips. “These changes can positively impact future years when it comes to safety and security in tree planting camps.”

construction industry

An interactive, general orientation program designed for the construction industry.

SiteREADYBC
ONLINE CONSTRUCTION SAFETY ORIENTATION

FOR ONLY \$65 PLUS GST REGISTER TODAY!

Participants will receive safety training on 20 topics including:

- Legislation
- Rights & Responsibilities
- Hazard Management
- Workplace Conduct
- Personal Protective Equipment
- WHMIS
- And much more

Successful students will be awarded certificates for both the SiteReadyBC program and WHMIS 2015

Email us for more information
onlinetraining@bccsa.ca

BCCSA
BC Construction Safety Alliance