

Lakeland Mills employee Brent Burton uses a pike pole to move jammed logs and boards safely.



# Sawmill transforms safety culture

By Gord Woodward

A transformation has happened at Lakeland Mills saw and planer mill in Prince George. Injuries are down. Employee engagement is up. And the results are inspiring change in other northern B.C. mills.

In 2012, a tragic explosion at Lakeland Mills took the lives of two people. Since then, the owners and workers of Lakeland Mills have worked hard to transform their culture, with the help of WorkSafeBC. “When you’ve experienced the worst, you don’t want to go there again,” says Brian Primrose, a sawmill stacker operator who serves on the mill’s joint health and safety committee. It was a turning point for the mill, not just to look at preventing catastrophic events, but to look at how their health and safety culture functioned day to day.

Today, their workforce is more engaged, says Primrose. “We’ve got more commitment than I’ve ever seen before.”

Joint committee meetings, for example, overflow with attendees. “We’re constantly turning people away,” Primrose says. “We couldn’t find a room big enough.” Of the mill’s 112 floor workers, 19 serve on the committee.

To get here, Lakeland sought input from staff on work processes, and health and safety, and responded with significant investment, says plant manager Harrison Wicks. “The company is committed to ensuring the guys have the tools they need to succeed.”

Chelsea Wilson, a WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer based in Prince George, used our Program and Committee Evaluation (PACE) Initiative to help channel the passion and resources at Lakeland. “It was a matter of bringing people together,” she says. “Through focused consultation we were building a culture.”

PACE includes an employer self-evaluation tool developed by WorkSafeBC to help address risks and hazards with specific outcomes in mind. It enhances employer understanding of effective risk management and creates meaningful engagement with the joint

committee and the broader workforce. The goal is to make improvements that lead to sustained compliance with occupational health and safety requirements.

“It’s a proactive approach,” Wicks says.

## Partnership engages and empowers workers

Being proactive requires the employer and joint committee members to be equally involved in creating a robust health and safety management system. At Lakeland, the employee buy-in was high. “Everyone feels comfortable in speaking up,” says Primrose. Adds Wicks: “This was an easy group to empower because they’re so passionate about safety.”

Workers feel supported by their employer, says millwright Levi Waters, another joint committee member. “Management has definitely had a lot of involvement,” he says. “We all want to make it a better and safer place.”

Communication — and trust — was key to improving safety throughout the mill. Lakeland dove into data collected in its integrated safety management system,

looking for areas for improvement. “One of the things that came out was behavioural safety,” Wicks recalls. With the help of a consultant, the mill applied the science of behaviour change to safety problems and identified behaviours that could cause accidents or lead to ill health.

The review also led to a surprising source of mill injuries: pike poles. Workers use the long, metal extensions to straighten or free jammed logs and boards from a safe zone. Using the poles seemed straightforward and low risk but Lakeland data showed the task was responsible for injuries ranging from cuts to workers being struck.

“We couldn’t figure out why people were getting hurt,” Primrose said. The reason became apparent when the joint committee interviewed the workers who were using the poles. Their training had covered what the poles did but not how to avoid injury while using them. Armed with that information, “we went to every single person on site and taught them to use the pike pole safely. Every single one of them learned something,” Primrose says with pride. “It was a game-changer for us.”



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Training wasn't limited to the use of the poles. All workers were also taught how to assess hazards and risks.

### Lessons shared with other mills

Transforming its culture has made a big impact on Lakeland's health and safety goals. The mill had eight time-loss claims in 2018; in 2019 it had three time-loss claims, and they were primarily related to slips, trips, and falls. The joint committee has already identified and started work on a plan to address the issues that lead to the 2019 injuries.

A reduction in claims can help a business' bottom line through lower WorkSafeBC premiums. There are other important returns on investments in safety too. "I think we're seeing it on the engagement side throughout the operation," says Wicks.

"As we started to see a continuous improvement on the safety side and the buy-in, we also saw it in our production and quality."

The impressive results have been noted by the mill's parent company, Sinclair Group Forest Products Ltd. It has four other locations in northern B.C. and plans to transplant the lessons from Lakeland to all its locations. "We've always had a very strong focus on sharing best

practices in the workplace," says Dave Herzig, Sinclair's general manager of lumber operations.

Sinclar has a corporate occupational health and safety steering committee that includes representatives from each of its plants. A team from Lakeland has presented twice to the committee. "You could just hear the excitement in their voices," Herzig says. "That opened the door for our other sites to say, 'Now I see how that fits for us'."

WorkSafeBC's Wilson says a commitment to safety has to come from the senior levels of an organization but can't end there. "Employees need to be heard. You've got to bring this down to the boots on the ground," she says. "Nobody knows the risk better than them."

Sawmill stacker operator Primrose agrees. He's been at the mill since 1982 and saw first-hand the catastrophic impact of the Lakeland explosion and fire. He and his co-workers wanted a voice in transforming the workplace culture in the new mill, he says, and Lakeland listened and responded.

"Health and safety all starts with how much people care about each other," he says. "We all came closer together." 🍷

— This story was originally published in the [WorkSafeBC 2019 Annual Report and 2020-2022 Service Plan](#).



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