



Keeping your head in the game

New initiatives are being taken to increase the safety of fallers in the woods, but some of B.C.'s longest-working fallers—who have achieved incident-free 40-plus-year careers— say one of the major things a faller can do is simply keep his head in the game, and stay focused on the job at hand.

By Paul MacDonald

Loggers might choose to work with a variety of bunchers, processors and loaders, or other types of equipment in their operations, but there's a particular type of logger who works with only one type of equipment: power saws. These are, of course, the hand fallers who work in varying terrain, including steep slope wood, much of it in B.C.

Safety-wise, staying focused on the job is important for everyone who works in the forest industry—but this is even more importantly the case for fallers, due to the inherent hazards of the job.

At a recent presentation, Peter Sprout, the BC Forest Safety Council's falling manager, said that the most important thing to ensure safe outcomes in the bush was recognizing the need to stay focused on the job—and understanding how hard that can be.

Sprout says no one has the perfect answer to faller safety. But the industry has come a long way from simply saying “get 10 feet away from the stump”.

Sprout said fallers can learn from current understandings including:

- The experiences and opinions of 40-year plus career fallers who have not had a single incident.
- Managing the impact of transitions from old growth to second growth blocks, given the perception that second growth is easier, with less hazards creating an environment where a faller may relax and let his guard down.

Some of B.C.'s longest-working fallers who have achieved incident-free 40-plus-year careers have shared with Sprout the most important thing they believe has kept them safe: chiefly keeping their head in the game, staying focused and leaving home appreciative of how good life really is before heading out to the bush.

Showing a series of slides of photographs of different terrains, he asked audience members to consider what they would anticipate would be more challenging days for fallers and less challenging days. The point he was making was there was a perception that there were a higher number of incidents in the more challenging blocks (old growth) versus less challenging blocks (second growth). In reality, though, incidents can happen in any type of timber. He was saying supervisors need to recognize that they might have to spend as much or more time walking through blocks that appear easy—because when fallers get in the mindset that it is “easy”, that's when many incidents happen.

Sprout said five falling incidents in 2013 were only inches away from being another five potential fatalities. All five incidents involved small diameter trees (six inches or less at the base but 50 feet or taller) striking the worker from behind while they were falling other trees. All occurred in second growth that most would accept as an easy day at work.



Two of the industry's safety working committees, the Coast Harvesting Advisory Group and Falling Technical Advisory Group, have identified some key areas to help support further improvements in safety performance in falling:

- Switchback training – Understanding what's going on in the brain when in an upset condition and how fallers can gain control over negative thoughts. A happy worker is a team player and team players create safe work cultures.
- Fit to fall – Dr. Delia Roberts of B.C.'s Selkirk College is working to observe fallers and their nutrition and hydration habits to provide the industry with the best recommended practices that ensure stable blood sugar levels for fallers. This is very important as it is often when blood sugar levels are low that impacts on the mind and body are negative and poor decision-making occurs or muscle fatigue sets in. Keeping consistent blood sugar levels can mean up to a three-quarter of a second increased response time—for fallers, the difference potentially between life and death.
- Degraded imagery – Research has shown that not everyone can look at something, a forest scene for example, and see the same things or identify potential hazards. 3-D image training can help people see more clearly what they haven't seen before, the benefit being biggest for new fallers as part of their new faller training, but also of benefit to established fallers, to literally see the forest and each tree with new eyes.
- Fatigue management – In-field testing is happening with wrist bands that can measure body functions and rate fatigue levels, informing the wearer of a need to rest, eat, drink, or stop work.

Sprout talked about the culture of safety and the most important roles of falling supervisors and falling partners.

He said falling supervisors can help their fallers "keep their head in the game" by:

- Talking to their fallers regularly
- Building trust
- Checking workmanship weekly
- Knowing when things are off for their faller
- Providing confidential support
- Reviewing problem trees
- Being available to discuss any home issues

He also talked about the role of the falling partners. "If fallers can get to the point that they look out for each other, showing concern for each other when one recognizes something is off, it will go a long way towards preventing falling incidents."

Sprout added that the one person who sees the faller on a regular basis is his partner, who will be the first to notice if he is cutting corners, or if there are any workmanship issues. "He is the one who can talk to the faller in a timely manner and ask if he needs help." The supervisor can encourage this culture.



On the B.C. Coast, mechanized logging has gained a good foothold in coastal logging—and provided great efficiencies, especially in second growth—but there will always be a place for the faller as long as there are big trees and steep slopes.

The job of faller on the B.C. Coast has always carried risks inherent to the tough conditions, but the industry is working to better manage those risks—and the drive to do that is now coming from forest company head offices. The CEOs of the major forest companies on the coast set up the Coast Harvesting Advisory Group (CHAG) in late-2012.

In addition to the major licencees operating on the coast, CHAG includes contractors—through the Truck Loggers Association—and representation from the United Steelworkers.

Falling contractor Steve Venus of Blue Thunder Contracting, of Campbell River, B.C., was asked to join CHAG, and ably represents the falling sector with the group. He knows falling inside and out, having grown up with it—it's truly been a family affair. Both his father and grandfather were fallers, and worked their way up through forest company MacMillan Bloedel to become camp managers.

"I spent a lot of time in logging camps—I grew up in logging camps, really, and have always had a passion for the woods," says Venus.

When he was 15, Venus was setting chokers on a long line logging operation at a Holbrook Dyson Logging camp at Woss, on northern Vancouver Island. "That was my first taste of logging work."

Having worked on the contractor side as a faller, and for MB himself, Venus and fellow faller Peter Sprout decided to set up an all-falling contracting outfit in 2003, Blue Thunder Contracting. Sprout later moved on to the BC Forest Safety Council.

Blue Thunder Contracting takes a very professional approach to falling, with safety as a top priority, says Venus. "Our work focuses on planning, and executing the plan," says Venus. "Most of our operations around this area of Vancouver Island are quite seasonal, with a limited window for the loggers to get in, and we need to communicate to work safely and effectively."

As part of the working safer effort, Venus noted that one of the areas that CHAG has been working on is "phase congestion".

"Phase congestion is when you get the different phases in a logging operation trying to work in the same area, and negatively impacting each other, in terms of being able to work safely and efficiently," he explained.

"Phase congestion might be when you're falling on a side hill in a block, and you've got the road crew in there trying to do some work, and there is a yarder wanting to come in. Everyone is kind of stacked on top of each other."

Phase congestion became more common during the downturn, as operations were running very tight. But there has been a conscious effort to reduce congestion.

"There are times when you have to accommodate other phases, but it shouldn't necessarily be happening all the time. We've seen some huge improvements in this with the work that CHAG has done."



Speaking of his own particular phase of logging, Venus notes that the most important thing going on for any faller is his mental state. “Does he have a clear mind? Is he focused on his job? Is he identifying the hazards that could get him hurt? When we start adding things to that with other phases of logging—stopping a faller so equipment can get through his signs or if there are other people working in the block—we’re taking away something very important, and breaking his concentration.

“Fallers fire up their power saw and enter a zone,” explains Venus. “The guys with 30-plus years of safe falling will tell you the most important thing wasn’t necessarily always getting 10 feet away from the stump of every tree—the most important thing is that their mind was clear and focused every day.”

Right now, things have almost swung 180 degrees for the coastal industry from a few years’ back, with many contractors being very busy, and finding it hard to get skilled people to keep logs on the move.

Through Blue Thunder Contracting, Venus oversees the work of about 40 hand fallers who are taking down wood on northern Vancouver Island. It can be hard to find fallers who fit their crew, says Venus.

So what does he look for in a faller?

“I’m looking for someone who has a passion for the work,” says Venus. “You are out there in the elements, the wind, the rain—and the bugs. You want the guy who wants to be a faller so bad that he’s banging on your door.”

In recent years, he’s hired two guys who have gone through the faller certification training program of the BC Forest Safety Council, and two more guys are now getting trained through the BCFSC. Under WorkSafeBC rules, you need to be certified by a recognized agency, such as the council, to work as a faller in the woods.

There are some positives to the training program, but also some challenges, says Venus. A challenge can be the training cost: approximately \$17,000 for tuition, \$2,700 for tools, plus additional out of pocket expenses for food, accommodation and travel.

“A positive is you are getting 30 days of training from highly skilled individuals with the program,” he added.

Venus favours a two track training system, which would involve maintaining the current training program. “I’d also like to see a training model where a contractor could apply to the council and WorkSafeBC, show them who the trainee is going to be, who the trainer is going to be, their safety plan—and be given the go-ahead to do the training under the watchful eye of the council and WorkSafeBC.”

Venus added that the working relationship the falling sector has with WorkSafeBC is a lot better, and more collaborative, than it was even five years ago. “The way everyone is approaching safety now is so much better than the finger pointing that had been going on.”

Training really is the key to being a good, and safe, faller, says Venus. “You can have the best training applicant, but if he doesn’t have the right training, he’s only going to be so good. An average guy with excellent training is going to be better than an excellent guy with bad training—that’s just a fact.”



Over the years, the forest industry has seen huge advances in technology, with the development of mechanized logging. Power saws are more advanced, productive and reliable. But due to its nature, falling really hasn't changed that much.

“But our overall approach to the job has changed a lot,” says Venus. “What we are doing is utilizing the people who are going in there ahead of us more. The people in the engineering department of the forest companies are advising us of things they might be seeing. The engineers are a very good resource for faller safety. Years ago, there would not have been that communication between the fallers and the engineers—but it's there now.” It's part of that team effort, he says.

These days, Venus does not get out to the woods to fall as much as he would like—and he misses it. “I still fall as much as I can. I love falling. It's who I am.”

But managing Blue Thunder Contracting, and keeping its fallers busy, from Oyster Bay through to Nimpkish, on Vancouver Island, takes up most of his time. And that brings its own set of challenges.

“My goal is to align myself and Blue Thunder with the licencees and the majors,” he says. And that includes being involved with efforts to move the industry ahead, with initiatives such as CHAG—especially when it receives the backing of the heavy hitters in the industry.

“Changes get made from the top, from the CEO level,” Venus says. “The CEOs are not in the field on a daily basis, but they are leaders, and they are prepared to make changes.

“Safety is about a number of things, including leadership. It's about the guy with the power saw being a leader, and the bullbucker who is responsible for that faller being a leader. It's about leadership all the way through, from the CEO through to the faller.”

And safety goes way beyond simply a good business practice, says Venus. “I feel privileged that I have the opportunity to employ fallers. I take great pride in that, and want them to come home safely every night. I take that personally. These are my guys, my friends, and in some cases, my family.”

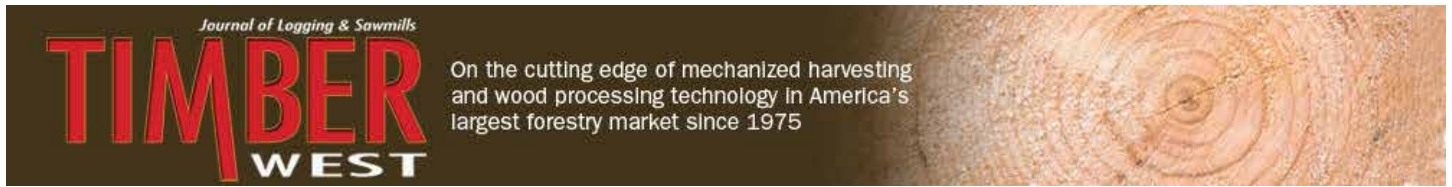
SAFER offers faller videos

The United Steelworkers is involved in the Coast Harvesting Advisory Group (see accompanying story) and is also involved with another industry safety initiative, SAFER.

The mission of SAFER (the Safety Advisory Foundation for Education and Research Council) is to assist workers and employers in the B.C. forest industry to improve accident prevention and create a healthy environment, both on and off the job.

While the B.C. forest industry has successfully renewed its commitment to combating faller fatalities through its forestry certification and training programs, SAFER recently teamed up with Western Forest Products Timberlands in an effort to improve the way fallers access day-to-day hazards.

With production assistance from Western Forest Products' Timberlands division, SAFER has produced timber falling related videos that deal with unexpected events and quarter management.



The result of these efforts is the professional production of three videos filmed in Western Forest Products Timberland operations—Unexpected Events, Quarter Management, and Hand Falling Second Growth Timber. The videos can be viewed at www.safer.ca