



## **B.C. sawmill explosion, fire ruled accidental**

**A coroner's jury has ruled the explosion and fire at the Lakeland Mills sawmill in Prince George, B.C. in 2012 as accidental, and it made a number of recommendations to help prevent such a tragedy from occurring again.**

*By Jim Stirling*

The explosion and fire that destroyed Lakeland Mills' sawmill in Prince George, B.C. in April 2012 has been ruled accidental by a coroner's jury.

The jury's verdict was predictable given the role of a coroner's inquest. Assigning blame is not part of the jury's mandate. Rather, it is charged with making recommendations to prevent a similar incident from recurring.

The scope of the jury's 33 recommendations suggests responsibilities for improvements and changes to procedures and practices are both essential and broad-based among several parties and agencies.

Glen Roche, 46, and Alan Little, 43, died as a result of the Lakeland explosion and fire, and more than 20 others were injured. The Lakeland incident followed a similar occurrence three months earlier that levelled the Babine Forest Products Sawmill near Burns Lake, British Columbia, about 220 kilometres west of Prince George. Two sawmill workers lost their lives in that incident and another 22 were injured. A coroner's inquest into that incident began July 13 in Burns Lake.

The five-man Prince George coroner's jury heard from 54 witnesses during four-and-a-half weeks of testimony between March 2 and May 14.

They listened to haunting recollections from the survivors working the fateful shift that night. And they heard testimony from first responders to the incident, the mill's owners and the expert witnesses who subsequently subjected the accident to meticulous interpretation and analysis.

There was conflicting evidence presented about precisely where in the mill the instigating explosion occurred. But the experts agreed it was fueled by dry sawdust. The Lakeland mill, like others in the region, was working to process salvage wood killed in the mountain pine beetle epidemic while it retained value for commodity lumber production. A characteristic of beetle killed fibre is the dryness, fineness and amounts of the sawdust created during processing. During her charge to the jury, coroner Lisa Lapointe said the dust was described at one point in the testimony as "floating in the air."

Sets of related recommendations were directed to strengthening industrial health and safety committees, and reinforcing the tools at the disposal of the RCMP to investigate workplace incidents involving serious injury



and death. One of the recommendations in the former category recommended by the jury concerned mandatory training and education for health and safety committee members. WorkSafeBC was also advised to develop methods to audit the effectiveness of health and safety committees in the workplace. The jury recommended WorkSafeBC champion workers' rights including their right to refuse unsafe work.

The inquest heard testimony that mill workers' were concerned about mill safety surrounding increasing dust levels. But the concerns were not recorded in safety meeting minutes nor were they reported to the Steelworkers Union. "In addition, while there were concerns about accumulation and dust as a fuel, the combustibility of wood dust was not well understood," noted Lapointe.

The jury also recommended something the industry has already instigated: to convene at least an annual meeting to pool health and safety best practices and circulate them. After the Lakeland explosion and fire, the CEOs of Canfor and West Fraser convened an extraordinary meeting to find ways of protecting other mill workers. It evolved into the development and distribution of dust control standards and procedures for use within each mill's safety programs, regardless of the operation's size.

The coroner's jury urged the RCMP to examine and improve officer training when investigating alleged criminal negligence in the workplace. The jury also recommended the RCMP include workplace deaths and injuries as "benchmark" offences requiring a higher priority. In a similar vein, the coroner's jury suggested the federal justice minister review the onus of proof requirements in cases of criminal negligence in the workplace.

Proposed changes to the Workers' Compensation Act came to the jury's attention. It recommended reviewing employer access to disaster sites and require their findings be forwarded to WorkSafeBC. The jury said that in the future "near miss" incidents causing a fire, explosion or business disruption should immediately be reported to WorkSafeBC. For example, the jury heard of an incident near the mill's headrig when sparks ignited sawdust creating an explosion. That was the day before the explosion and fire at the Babine Forest Products mill near Burns Lake.

The B.C. Ambulance Service was instructed by the jury to review its procedures regarding access to emergency sites and not to use an ambulance as a command post.

Among other recommendations from the jury, which was thorough in its review of the testimony presented, was for sawmills to employ a safety watch person on every shift to monitor dust levels and systems. A further recommendation was that the United Steelworkers Union mail their regular newsletters to sawmill workers' homes so family members could become more aware of safety issues in their loved ones' work place.



## **Union calls for full public inquiry into sawmill accidents**

The coroner's inquest into the Lakeland Mills explosion and fire and the 33 recommendations it generated—while helpful in shedding more light on the tragedy and improving measures to prevent a recurrence—doesn't go far enough for many.

For the families of Glen Roche and Alan Little, who were killed on the job in the Lakeland incident, and the 20 other mill workers injured, accountability remains unsettled. Many involved are calling for a public inquiry into the explosion and fires that destroyed the sawmills at Babine Forest Products and Lakeland three months apart in 2012. A coroner's inquest into the Babine Forest Products explosion began in July.

The United Steelworkers—which represents the unionized work force at both now rebuilt sawmills—is championing the cause for a full public inquiry. It's a proposal already turned down by B.C. Premier Christy Clark. However, the union is continuing its efforts with a petition and in May was more than half-way to its goal of 10,000 signatures. The intent is to present the petition to the provincial legislature this fall. The United Steelworkers petition can be accessed at: [www.usw.ca/inquiry](http://www.usw.ca/inquiry)