



Timber Harvesting Safety: Exposures for Ground Personnel

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I was in a restaurant the other day near a large paper mill and overheard a conversation among some retirees. There was a lot of “Do you remember when?” One comment struck me, when they were discussing changes in the logging business. One of these old-timers questioned whether the new equipment in place had made logging safer.

As the Director of Loss Control for Forestry Mutual Insurance Company, I always make safety the priority. We review injuries to see how we can prevent similar injuries from occurring. We constantly study statistics to find injury trends, so we can reverse them.

And statistics tell us that the answer to the gentleman’s question is “yes” — in-woods fatalities have declined significantly in the last 20 years, and we can associate this decline with the increase in mechanization.

Exposure

We have new exposures, however. Injuries still occur from harvesting equipment striking workers on the ground, and some of these injuries result in fatalities.

The Timber Harvesting and Transportation Safety Foundation (THATS — www.loggingsafety.com) is a nonprofit organization that identifies and prioritizes those exposures and funds educational projects to turn the statistics around. Several THATS-funded videos have focused on safety at the log deck, skidder operator awareness, safe operations for feller bunchers, and other important topics.

One video demonstrated that a skidder driver could not see a ground person until that person was 28 feet in front of the skidder. Getting the word out about this kind of hazard, and making that word stick, is a big piece of the task THATS has taken on by producing videos and promoting their use in education and orientation workshops.

So again, “YES!” But even though more loggers use machines for harvesting and loading, there are still many manual felling, bucking, and limbing operations that require ground personnel. And no matter how mechanized we get, statistics show most injuries still occur to ground personnel, such as deck hands and toppers, because operators get their equipment too close to them.

Building Awareness

When I prioritize safety training, I direct it toward building awareness of the exposure of personnel on the ground. Owners and foremen must constantly monitor this situation and train employees to maintain safe working distances — and enforce compliance.

It is a huge responsibility to keep everyone focused on safety. Regular and consistent reminders, weekly and monthly safety meetings, and annual training are key to keeping employees safe. Even a daily reminder on three critical points would save lives:



- Observe proper working distances!
- Mobile logging equipment operators — do not invade the safe zone of ground personnel!
- Permit no one within two tree lengths of any felling operation!

No Short Cuts

In the logging environment, one lapse of focus can lead to catastrophic consequences. Maintain working distances. Do not take short cuts. Slow down and make the right decision. Think about and understand what reactions your action may cause. Talk “safety,” and hold meetings to address safe working distances.

Here are some additional pointers that, if accepted and enforced, can push down the ground personnel fatality statistics:

- Observe proper distance around skidding activities.
- Be aware of “blind spots” on mobile logging equipment.
- Never walk under anything that could fall on you, including equipment and processed timber.
- Avoid walking on log piles. Don’t place yourself near something that could roll on you.
- Drivers should remain in a safe area until the truck is loaded.
- Avoid “pinch points”— a major pinch point is between the loader and the log truck. Pull away from the loader before strapping down.
- Never stand “in-line” to a buck saw. Buck saws must point away from people and equipment.
- Wear high-visibility clothing.

Equipment operators have a special responsibility, whether in the woods or at the landing, where many activities happen within a limited space area. Add ground personnel and massive equipment with troublesome blind spots, and the injury potential is obvious.

Blind Spots

Although both stationary and mobile equipment operators have the responsibility to ensure they are not placing others nearby at risk, the fact is that blind spots place limitations on their ability to control their work area.

Ultimately, understanding these blind spots (loader and feller buncher operators both operate with the disadvantage of blind spots, and skidder operators especially so) and accepting the responsibility to avoid them, must be a training priority for personnel on the ground. That means for everyone.



The goal of THATS — and of Forestry Mutual — is to eliminate injuries and deaths in the logging woods. Use the resources available to train all personnel and reinforce that training. Browse the website at www.loggingsafety.com. Do your part to return home safe each day to your loved ones. Work safely and keep an eye on your co-workers.