



## REMOTE INDUSTRIAL CAMPS POST-COVID-19

On March 26, 2020 the BC government announced forestry as one of many essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, many forestry companies in BC continued to operate as best they could despite the challenging economic climate and the necessity to rapidly adopt new safety protocols based on provincial health recommendations. The question is whether these recommended safety protocols are being effectively applied to the remote wilderness areas where much of the forestry work takes place.

With the COVID-19 virus being added to the list of hazards on a forestry worksite, companies are challenged to find ways to increase the protection of their employees by providing higher safety standards, especially with regard to personal hygiene, general cleanliness, and social distancing.

Implementing new safety measures to control the spread of viruses in remote camps and field operations can be a very difficult endeavour. While social distancing on cutblocks should not be a problem given the nature of the work, fresh water supply, handwashing stations and general cleanliness are issues that will need to improve on worksites that are located in rough and rugged terrain. Requiring the greatest consideration are remote accommodations, such as logging camps, where over-crowdedness, close living quarters, shared bathrooms, and often dilapidated conditions have, in my own experience, made them ideal sites for the spread of seasonal colds and flus.

Licensee-owned logging camps in BC operate under the *Industrial Camps Regulation*, which states they must “respond to health hazards as they arise, including mitigating their harmful effects.” On April 23, 2020, an *Order of the Provincial Health Officer* relating to industrial camps was released and includes such measures as:

- Clean and disinfect regularly.
- Maintain social distancing of 2-metres, even at mealtime.
- Limiting gatherings (such as in the mess hall) to less than 50.
- Having sufficient infection control supplies, such as handwash stations.
- Raising awareness for workers to stay home when they are feeling ill.

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Through recent discussions with BC Northern Health’s environmental health officers, I learned that they are charged with conducting annual inspections of industrial camps, focusing primarily on “general set up, sanitation, water systems and food.” However, larger and busier camps are given higher scrutiny and are inspected more often. Smaller camps, especially older sites in remote locations, seem to operate on bare-minimum standards and often remain in a rundown, aged state.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, northern health inspectors are now being overwhelmed with an increased workload, and have since enlisted the help of conservation officers, compliance and enforcement officers, and other Ministry of Forests officials, to ensure compliance of the new standards.

Improving the living conditions of camps in the BC Interior is an expensive endeavour. Comparatively, oil and gas camps, such as those found in BC’s Peace River District, have rooms with their own bathrooms, showers and TV’s that enable workers to better meet standards of good hygiene, cleanliness and social distancing. However, the oil and gas industry (prior to the recent recession) had the money and resources to spend

on improved conditions, and invested in attracting the workforce required to keep the industry moving forward.

Forestry companies, on the other hand, survive on much tighter operating margins. Footing the bill for camp improvements is costly, and the logistics involved in maintaining proper safety standards in far remote areas is under-

standably challenging. However, this is an investment that needs to be made if the industry is to survive and thrive.

With the introduction of the new industrial camp standards, the onus of implementation has been placed solely on the contractor and the licensee. Government subsidies exist through potential breaks during the appraisal process; however, the financial offset in stumpage being sufficient to meet the additional cost of safety protocols is by no means guaranteed. With the amount of money that the federal government has been promising in aid across the country, a significant amount should be directed towards forestry and their remote operations. This will help to ensure necessary safety standards are being met, and allow for the survival of the industry in a post-COVID-19 era. Such benefits would create a more attractive work environment for a new, younger generation of forestry workers, and would help to be proactive in alleviating the risk of spreading the current virus, and others that will inevitably be faced in the future.▲

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