



By Roger Harris,
BC Forest Safety Ombudsman

Joseph Leroux died on a spring evening in 2006 near Mackenzie, 190 kilometres north of Prince George on the Finlay-Philip Forest Service Road. The 52-year-old's loaded logging truck unexpectedly met another empty one at a corner and went over an embankment.

The tragedy led to a coroner's inquest last year, believed to be the first into the death of log trucker in northern B.C. The coroner's jury produced 16 recommendations directed at the Ministry of Forests and Range, Work-SafeBC, the BC Forest Safety Council and the Insurance Corporation of B.C.

All were well thought out proposals, but I want to focus on just one of them in this short article — that ICBC implement a forestry endorsement for Class 1 drivers' licenses that would require 50 hours of "ride along time in a commercial logging truck."

Time for action on crucial resource roads issue

The recommendation is grounded in the reality of our province's resource roads. Consider that:

- There are 29 different trailer configurations for logging trucks.
- A unique and extensive range of skills and expertise is necessary to operate the numerous vehicle configurations in the wide variety conditions found on resource roads.
- Grades of 20 to 25 per cent are common on resource roads, twice the steepness found on paved highways.

In early 2007, I published a report on the impacts on forestry safety of labour shortages and inadequate training. Six months before the Leroux inquest, I recommended that the Forest Safety Council develop a system to certify logging truck drivers and that ICBC introduce a related Class 1 license endorsement.

Those ideas didn't come out of thin air. They target problems identified for me in months of province-wide input from forest licencees, contractors, logging truck drivers, training institutions and agencies that fund truck-driver training. They offered a clear consensus that existing minimum employment requirements for drivers often fall far short of the expertise actually required to operate loaded logging trucks.

This February, I released a separate report on resource roads titled No Longer the Road Less Travelled. Three key factors led to this

work. First, log hauling leads all other occupations for fatalities in B.C.'s forest sector. Second, resource road traffic volumes are mushrooming. Finally, the largest percentage of calls received by my office involves resource road maintenance and construction, regulatory jurisdiction and cycle times.

My second major report also followed months of meetings across the province, which this time reached beyond the forest sector. This is because resource roads serve many other industries, including mining, gas, oil, tourism, agriculture and general freight cargo to name a few. As well, resource roads are literally the only points of access to the public highway system for some communities, especially first nations.

The broader input resulted in a new, more comprehensive recommendation to improve the qualifications of all users of our resource roads — including drivers of light vehicles such as pick-up trucks, who accounted for four of the five fatalities on logging roads last year.

Our office continues to advocate for a driver certification-endorsement system that includes the full range of vehicles and trailer configurations under the Class 1 License. I now also propose that an endorsement/training program should be extended to drivers of all classes of vehicles that operate on our resource roads.

This need will not go away, far from it. The demand for more qualified drivers can only grow in the coming years, given factors such as the development of inland ports in Prince George to steadily expanding activity in all resource sectors.

Meeting that demand requires a professional truck driver force that is properly-trained in the full range of skills necessary to operate specific trucks in specific situations like resource roads. This means training and qualification programs based on provincially-recognized levels of training and expertise confirmed by certification and endorsement.

The men and women who use B.C.'s resource roads — those like Joseph Leroux — deserve no less. Last year's coroner's jury saw this clearly, and it was also confirmed by contributors to both my reports on forest safety.

I urge ICBC to consider these facts, and take the lead in moving forward on this crucial issue. Given our crowded resource roads, action is needed now, because time is not our friend.

Roger Harris is B.C.'s forest safety ombudsman, an independent position created by the BC Forest Safety Council in 2006 to investigate safety issues and recommend how best to address them. More information, and the full text of his first two reports, is at www.bcforestsafe.org/nav-ombud.html. ■

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