

SAFETY ALERT

Forestry Harvesting Operations

Backcountry workers should be aware: Unusual snowpack conditions create potential for risk of avalanches

Location: British Columbia

Date: January 28, 2017

Details: Workers whose jobs take them into British Columbia's backcountry are at potential risk of serious injury or death in avalanche terrain. In January, the snowpack in several regions of B.C. showed indications of risk of avalanche. WorkSafeBC is reminding employers of the need to identify, assess, and mitigate avalanche risks.



Since 1998 in B.C., avalanches have caused three worker deaths and 50 accepted time-loss injury claims, including three injury claims in the first nine months of 2016. While the majority of workers injured were in occupations within the ski hill and winter lodge industries, a land surveyor and a truck driver were also injured.

A recent example of the danger of being trapped by avalanche: In the BC Interior, four workers traveling on a Forest Service Road in two vehicles were trapped behind two large snow avalanches approximately 7km apart that occurred on the road behind them after they accessed their logging site. Each snow avalanche was approximately 3m - 5m deep covering 50m - 70m of road. Helicopter evacuation of the workers was hampered by freezing rain but after a reassessment of the avalanche conditions by a qualified person at the two sites, heavy equipment was able to clear the slide debris allowing the workers to evacuate the area.

Workers in B.C.'s primary resource, construction and adventure tourism industries may be working in avalanche terrain and therefore could face risks of avalanches at their worksites. Examples of worksites which may have avalanche risk to workers include forest service roads, highways, and backcountry areas.

Avalanche risk can be present all year in some areas and snow stability can change daily, hourly or even sooner depending on sufficient snow depth, steep-enough terrain and the right weather conditions.

“We want to prevent employers and workers from being caught by surprise by the risk of an avalanche as a result of the rapidly changing weather and snowpack conditions,” says Patrick Davie, manager of Prevention Field Services for Kamloops region. “Employers in these situations are required under the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation to ensure a well-rehearsed safety plan is in place and well-understood by all workers. If the conditions warrant it, the best plan may be to avoid areas of high risk entirely until the end of the avalanche season.”

WorkSafeBC's [Occupational Health and Safety Regulation](#) 4.1.1 requires all employers whose workers travel through, work around or within a potential avalanche hazard area to have a qualified person conduct a risk assessment and if there is risk of an avalanche, develop and implement appropriate avalanche safety plans and /or a program.

Employers can work with their local WorkSafeBC prevention officer to determine the appropriate compliance measures. To learn more about avalanche safety for workers and employers [click here](#).

Learnings & Suggestions: Visit the Canadian Avalanche Association [website](#) for more information including avalanche safety plan resources.

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