

SAFETY IN LIMITED SCALE LOGGING

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INTRODUCTION

A Bush Inspector is appointed under the provisions of the Bushworkers Act 1945 which is an Act to make provisions for the Safety and Protection of Bush Workers. The Act is administered by the Department of Labour.

The Act defines a Bush Worker as being any person who works in a Bush Undertaking which in turn is described as "Any tree felling or logging undertaking, conducted for commercial purposes, in which any person is engaged in felling trees by any means or logging operations, and, whether or not conducted for commercial purposes includes -

Felling trees by any means for the purposes of land clearance.

Thinning, pruning, and topping operations in connection with silviculture.

Transportation of logs, flitches, sawn timber, or waste products otherwise than on public road or street or a Government Railway.

Construction and maintenance of private roads, tramways, or bridges, and the shifting of any plant, for any of the foregoing purposes."

The role of the Inspector is to inspect all plant that is being used to ensure that not only is it suitable but that it is being used in a safe manner and also to ensure that the practices and methods of work being carried out are not dangerous to any person.

If the Inspector is not satisfied that the requirements of the Act are being complied with he may in writing give directions either to the employer or to any person for the time being in charge and such directions as he deems necessary to prevent accidents or to ensure compliance with the Act.

Employers have the responsibility of ensuring that the plant is soundly constructed and free from defect and under general supervision and regularly inspected. They also are required to keep a Register of Accidents, and notify the Inspector of serious accidents.

Every Person has the responsibility of ensuring that the plant is used safely and that practices and methods of work are carried out safely.

Any person who is regularly engaged in the business of selling or otherwise disposing of logs or timber and who lets a contract for the felling of trees by any means or for logging is to notify an Inspector, or the Department of Labour, of details of the contract let.

Bush Inspectors are also Inspectors of Factories and have the responsibility for the safety health and welfare of sawmills, treatment plants and other allied factories under the provision of the Factories and Commercial Premises Act 1981 and other legislation.

LOGGING OPERATIONS AND SAFETY

Seldom have these two subjects been synonymous. The industry has always been recognised as a dangerous one and this was understandable in the past when puny man with the most primitive tools pitted himself against some of the greatest creatures nature has produced.

Indigenous logging pre 1940 was a matter of man, an easily renewable resource in those days, trying under most difficult conditions to handle trees and logs that would have fully extended the capacity of today's most modern machinery. The results were inevitable, accidents plagued the industry.

There were compensating factors otherwise the mayhem would have been more severe. Bush Workers lived and grew up in bush camps and sawmill villages and learned their trade from father to son. They were experienced before they started work. When new workers were engaged they worked in pairs with an older hand until they became part of the team. Accidents were rarely caused through error or lack of skill on the part of the bush worker. Failure of plant, collapse of bridges, tramways and roads were the main causes of the serious accidents of the day.

Bush Inspectors, then known as Bridge and Tramway Inspectors, were appointed in 1946. There were four appointments made and their principle work was inspection of plant and reporting of accidents.

In the meantime logging of exotics had gained momentum as the major plantings of the 1920's began to mature. This coincided with the advent of the crawler tractor and the forerunner of the modern log truck. New sawmills started up in non-traditional areas and a new labour force was needed. Even the worker who moved out of an indigenous operation needed to acquire new skills. How any of them did so was a matter of luck and survival. There was no formal training nor was there the same opportunity to learn from association in a close knit community.

LIMITED SCALE LOGGING

By the 1960's logging except for a few exceptions had become fragmented. With the diminishing resource of the vast areas of indigenous bush and the advent of the crawler tractor and log truck plus the rapidly rising costs of paying and maintaining workers in outback communities, sawmills were being relocated in towns.

Japan became interested in our exotic logs and the trade appeared to be lucratively attractive, particularly as there was a large timber industry labour force on the market with the closing of many King Country sawmills.

There were also many earthmoving tractors and excavators idle because of the loss of Roads Board contracts and the downturn in opencast coal mining. Many entrepreneurs entered this logging field, from finance organisations to out of work earthmoving operators. Almost anyone who could raise a deposit on, or rent, a second hand tractor and gather a few workers together entered this field of contracting. This was the real start to limited scale logging.

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Seldom was any conscious thought given to safety with the majority of these operations. The main aim was financial survival. So often the key machine, the tractor, despite its new coat of paint, would not be in a suitable state to withstand the rigours of logging in small stands of timber often grown on the rougher, less accessible, part of a farm.

Seldom if ever were suitable canopies or bush guards fitted. Tracks that possibly could have survived another year or two of earthmoving work gave out rapidly under the constant strain of breaking in new tracks and breaking out logs with a driver without the skill to nurse the machine and a constant pressure to produce. Brakes and steering also tended to fail under the extra stress imposed.

So often do these limited scale operations present problems not present to the same extent in more regular operations where the resources are more suitable. The timber is often growing in remote areas to log with tractors without a tremendous amount of tracking, the trees invariably either scattered or fence line planted with undue weather exposure causing malformations, hang ups etc. The disproportionate amount of breaking into the standing bush or felling or breaking out of the logs in hauling combined with the farmers demands to avoid his fence lines and his grasslands created real problems even for an experienced crew and a death trap for the newcomer.

Many of these operations failed for financial reasons long before the first blocks of bush were logged. So often the first contractor in a desperate endeavour to recoup his costs harvested the easy pickings from several blocks before going broke, thus leaving an even more hazardous and less lucrative venture for the

next contractor.

There was no resource available either time, money or venue for training either employers or workers in the skills needed for safety or survival. The accident rate in many of these operations was appalling. Elementary safety precautions such as the provision of suitable winch power and sufficient rope for back pulling were neglected with dire results. Even safety helmets had to be forced onto many of the contractors and workers.

ACCIDENTS

The Department of Labour does not keep separate records for large and small operations and in any case it has never been the policy of the small time operator to comply with the requirement to notify accidents. The Bush Inspectorate has always been far too lightly manned to apply the provisions of the Act and has difficulty keeping up with the small operators movements or even knowledge of their existence in some cases.

However, information has filtered through unofficial channels usually long after an accident has occurred and of course most of the serious ones, fatalities etc, do get notified somehow. There is sufficient information on record to state that the proportion of serious accidents in limited scale operations would be at least five times greater than in more regular operations.

WHAT MEASURES CAN BE TAKEN TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

Of recent years the Logging and Forest Industries Training Board has been set up for on site training and certification of bushworkers. This is a major step in the right direction and was long overdue in a country that has and still does depend largely on its Timber Industry for financial survival. Some benefits from this training have been passed on through the Industry.

It is not considered however that this training in itself is enough. We still have the instances of qualified loggers being killed and seriously injured through unsafe acts and practices. Not only that, but also where the training and assessment is available in the larger operations and where there is a stable grouping of permanent smaller operations it is still not readily available to or viable for limited scale loggers. Because of their location, the transitory nature of their contracts and the cost involved in downtime and direct expenditure they do not have access to training courses or to hire expertise or experience.

Is the type of training and advice that these employers and workers require really available taking into consideration their precarious financial position and their almost nomadic existence. Often they are not even aware of the improvements and the availability of personal protective equipment.

Until there is a whole hearted Nationwide approach to putting safety first, not only with training and supervision of workers but also with relief from the constant pressure of the need to produce at all costs to remain financially viable, employers and

workers in this field will continue to take dangerous shortcuts and leave themselves vulnerable to serious injury.

What other Industry in this country needs to have its workers do this to survive?

