



A joint health and safety committee, like this one at Pinnacle Renewable Energy, is mandated for large employers. But, companies in the wood pellet industry are going the extra mile to have a monthly Canada-wide safety meeting via conference call.

Unique safety committee publishes 2018 work plan

By Helen Plischke

Industry competitors in the wood pellet industry are checking their competitiveness at the door as they craft their work plan and address safety issues.

On the second Wednesday of every month, John Stirling, president of Princeton Standard Pellet Corporation, gets on the phone to eight of his closest competitors in the wood pellet industry and has a candid, no-holds-barred conversation about worker safety. Their discussion ranges from best practices and employee training, to combustible dust management, incident reporting, and safety tips.

It's an unusual level of sharing for a group of competitors, say members of the committee, which was struck in 2014 under the umbrella of the Wood Pellet Association of Canada (WPAC). The 18-member committee includes representatives from nine wood pellet manufacturers — seven from B.C. and one each from Alberta and Nova Scotia — ranging from small operators such as Stirling's, to wood industry powerhouses such as Canfor and West Fraser. The BC Forest Safety Council and the Quebec Wood Export Bureau are also on the committee.

"We've been remarkably open about sharing ideas, and brainstorming more ideas," says Stirling, who oversees 45 employees at the 110,000-tonne-per-year wood pellet operation in Princeton, B.C. "People share ideas about what they've done, or they'll say, 'We have the same problem, let us know what you figure out.' Everybody has been very open and committed."

Training workshops planned for 2018

The committee has just published its 2018 work plan, consisting of nine goals, each with tasks and action items that will be reported on monthly during the meetings. The plan is drawn up by the committee early in the year, then members seek feedback and approval from their companies. WorkSafeBC is looped in too, for support and guidance. Finally, publishing the plan helps keep everyone focused and accountable, says Gordon Murray, WPAC executive director.

This year, WPAC's plan includes delivery of two training workshops on Process Safety Management, a field more often associated with the chemical industry, but is now increasingly part of a new approach to managing hazards in other process industries. While occupational safety focuses on things like training,

safety equipment, and supervision, process safety focuses on the bigger picture: engineering design, operating practices, and avoiding process-related incidents. It asks, in other words, what could go wrong on a large scale?

The wood pellet industry has relatively complex manufacturing processes and hazards with a potential for large-scale events: wood fibres, for instance, can produce a synthesis gas when dried, and a buildup of this gas can be flammable or explosive. Given that the members of WPAC work with complex processes, the WPAC is an ideal organization to test the principles of process safety, says Tom Pawlowski, WorkSafeBC manager of primary resources in Industry and Labour Services.

“What is so unique about the wood pellet association, and their safety committee, is that they really believe in not competing on their safety. If they have setbacks, they bring it forward and talk about it. It’s really very impressive.”

Industry improvements

Since the safety committee was established, Murray says the pass rate for safety inspections at wood pellet plants has improved dramatically, while overall profitability in the sector has gone up.

Meanwhile, the popularity of the safety committee has grown to the point that non-WPAC members are seeking to join. Wood industry giant West Fraser is one of the newest members.

“We’re just a bit humbled at being on the committee at this point,” says Troy Withey, safety manager and representative for West Fraser corporate pulp. “It’s well organized and well led, and we appreciate hearing the best practices.”

Last year, representatives from West Fraser were among approximately 60 operators who attended a third-annual day-long safety forum in Prince George, planned and executed by WPAC and the safety committee. This year’s forum happens June 6, and all forest product sectors are invited — sawmills, pulp and paper, lumber, and more.

“We all have the same issues,” says Murray, who hopes to attract about 100 people. “By bringing information to everyone, and demonstrating to the

public and WorkSafeBC that we take safety seriously, we think it’s all adding to the culture.”

Wood industry sets an example

Other industries could learn from the success of the safety committee and the willingness of members to be open and transparent, says committee chair Scott Bax, senior vice-president of operations at Pinnacle Renewable Energy, Canada’s largest wood pellet producer.

“In other industries I think there’s a general desire to collaborate, but a general reticence at the same time,” Bax says. “We saw that if, as an industry, we couldn’t be safe and be portrayed as being safe, then the actions of one could put the future of all of us in jeopardy.”

You can read the WPAC safety committee’s 2018 annual work plan in [Canadian Biomass Magazine](#). 

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A brief history

The Wood Pellet Association of Canada (WPAC) was formed in 1996 and has members from B.C., Alberta, Quebec, and the Maritime provinces. It currently represents 95 percent of production capacity in the country — 70 percent of which is in B.C. Canadian exports of wood pellets are worth \$500 million annually.