

# COVID-19 and Silviculture Projects

## Forestry Safety Advocate

The arrival of novel coronavirus and detection of cases of COVID-19 in Canada presents a risk that silviculture and tree planting contractors need to evaluate as part of their planning process. While healthy young workers may be among those least likely to experience serious impacts from COVID-19, there are still distinct health risks associated with the illness and our industry has an obligation to reduce risks to our workers and to other groups around us, and has a duty to minimize our burden on the health care system so that the most needy can receive proper help.

This bulletin addresses five sets of considerations related to prevention and mitigation of COVID-19, with special attention to work camps where workers gather during the primary tree planting season that runs from late April to early August. There are key conditions to silviculture and tree planting work that inform the recommendations in this bulletin:

- The majority of workers arrive at their seasonal job from distant locations and may be exposed to illness during travel.
- Work camps comprise isolated systems. It is IMPERATIVE that proper steps are taken to prevent introduction of COVID-19 or any other illness to work camps and crews, in order to protect the health of all members of that camp, and to preserve the opportunity of all staff to perform their jobs.
- Workers share common spaces in bush camps, in shared dining and washing facilities in camps, in lodge or motel accommodations, and in the trucks they use to get to work each day.
- Washing and hygiene facilities in camps are sometimes limited.
- Workers travel through the province throughout the season, and frequently use public facilities on days off.
- Many workers live outside in tents for several months of the work season.

It is noted that the industry is familiar with the challenge of reducing the transmission of communicable disease, and many of the safeguards suggested in this guide comprise measures that will also help reduce the risk of viral gastroenteritis (stomach bugs) and colds and flu that can affect the workforce in any given season. These recommendations thus provide an opportunity to re-evaluate the industry's overall approach to preventing illness and stimulate enduring changes in practice that will benefit all parties.

### 1) Pre-season communication and planning

- Instruct staff to exercise proper precautions when traveling to work, including frequent hand washing, minimizing contact with large crowds, and avoiding touching one's own face when in public places.
- Inform staff of the steps your company is taking to protect them from COVID-19. Encourage staff to be part of the solution in ensuring a safe and healthy workplace for the coming season.

- Provide staff with a Coronavirus Fact Sheet, obtained from a government agency or Center for Disease Control.  
Example: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/2019-ncov-factsheet.pdf>
- Direct staff with questions toward recognized information sources, such as government websites.  
Example: [http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/coronavirus-\(novel\)](http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/coronavirus-(novel))
- Companies should consider additional training for replacement staff in key positions who can step into place in the case of a supervisor, crew boss, or other key staff becoming unavailable due to illness.
- Educate key staff, including first aid attendants and supervisors, about COVID-19, including appropriate support for mild to severe cases.
- Contact suppliers in advance to ensure timely delivery of sufficient hygiene and cleaning supplies, including hand soap and hand sanitizer.
- Encourage workers to bring their own sanitizer and hygiene supplies for personal use both on and off the jobsite.
- Identify potential rental accommodations in case of a need to provide additional warm and dry facilities for workers affected by COVID19 or subject to quarantine.
- Identify Medical Health Officers in charge of your areas of operation and ensure that supervisors have contact information for these parties and local medical services.
- Review company policies regarding sick-days, and ensure adequate measures are in place to support and accommodate workers requiring sick leave. Given the nature of COVID-19 as a concern to the entire public, employers should be encouraged to do as much as possible to support workers in recovering while still limiting their potential exposure to other persons.

## 2) Camp and crew screening

The primary focus of illness-prevention protocols should be preventing the introduction of disease to the camp. Camps that maintain proper screening measures have the opportunity to operate in a sheltered environment and may provide safe refuge from the spread of illness elsewhere in public. However, healthy conditions in camp will only occur if two conditions are met: 1) Employers exercise proper pre-screening and education measures. 2) Workers cooperate with the steps designed to protect them through the season.

Efforts to screen staff **MUST** begin immediately in order to ensure that staff are given adequate notice to adjust their schedules for the coming season. All staff must understand that their individual choices can impact a wider group, and they are personally responsible for doing their part in not spreading illness to the workplace.

It is **STRONGLY** recommended that **ALL EMPLOYERS** conduct pre-screening of staff prior to them arriving at or proceeding to camp. This will help protect both the health and viability of your operations, and the overall integrity and stability of the industry. With the frequent movement of workers between companies, it is critical that **ALL** employers adopt common practices in this regard. Pre-screening includes asking questions, setting self-quarantine thresholds, and conducting tests upon arrival. All measures are considered important due to the potential for asymptomatic carriers to be transmitters of COVID-19.

- Staff who are now returning from Iran, Italy, or China should be instructed to stay home for 14 days after leaving those countries. They should monitor themselves daily for symptoms like fever or cough. This list of countries should be revised based on input from Health Canada and updated as the season arrives.
- Staff who have been in close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 should stay home for 14 days after their last encounter and avoid contact with other people, including other company staff. Individuals should monitor themselves daily for symptoms like fever and cough.
- Staff who have travelled to other areas not currently affected by major outbreaks should monitor themselves daily for symptoms like fever or cough for 14 days.
- Kitchen staff must be particularly diligent in self-reporting, as they have the potential to impact large numbers of fellow staff.

### Temperature screening

In Canada, medical examinations or health-related tests are acceptable for potential employees only if the testing or examination is reasonably necessary to confirm the potential employees' ability to perform a bona fide occupational requirement of the role. It is generally impermissible for Canadian employers to mandatorily require employees to undergo a health-related test such as taking temperatures at Canadian worksites. Such testing may be permissible, however, if COVID-19 becomes widespread in Canada or if Canada's public health agencies announce that the coronavirus outbreak has reached pandemic proportions.

If mandatory employee temperature testing becomes justified in Canada, the dignity of employees should be ensured throughout the process. Results of employees' tests should be kept in the strictest of confidence; they should not be shared with other employees, except on a "need to know" basis. Employees with whom the information has been shared because they "need to know" should be reminded that they are prohibited from disclosing it for unauthorized purposes.

Temperature screening must be done by a trained person with a properly calibrated device, with temperature thresholds based on Health Canada guidelines or input from a Medical Health Officer. Common thresholds for COVID-19 screening at this time specify 37.5 degrees as an indicator of potential infection.

### 3) Camp and workplace modifications

- Increase and improve hand-washing facilities. Effective hand-washing requires heated running water, soap, and appropriate hand-drying supplies. Hand-washing facilities should be provided in sufficient number and size to accommodate workers without line-ups or delay. Basins of stagnant or re-used water should NOT be used for handwashing purposes. Practical hand-washing systems may include:
  - Sinks with running and heated water.
  - Trough or gutter-style systems with running heated water.
  - Refillable water containers with spigots, filled with warm water, with catch basins or buckets underneath. Such containers can be placed on tables or blocks in multiple locations and required refiling at period of peak camp activity.
- Hand sanitizer is a helpful addition to the workplace but is not as effective as soap and water.
- Hand-washing facilities should be located immediately adjacent to washrooms and shared dining and gathering areas.
- Hand-drying facilities must also be provided. These may include containers of paper towels or dispensing devices. Rain-shelters may be necessary to ensure that supplies remain dry.
- Assign adequate staff to maintain hand-washing and drying facilities in camps. Supplies must be checked and replenished daily.
- Provide cleaning supplies for proper sanitization of common dining areas and kitchens. Cleaning should occur after every meal.
- Provide cleaning supplies for proper sanitization of crew vehicles. Cleaning should occur on a regular basis, and ideally at least once per shift.
- Assign staff to clean showers and toilets on a regular basis.
- Ensure adequate staff resources are assigned to cleaning duties. Workers on alternate duties may provide assistance in this regard.
- Ensure adequate staff and resources are provided for maintaining additional heated water systems for hygiene purposes in camps.
- Provide N-95 masks for use by staff with coughing or sneezing symptoms so that they may reduce their risk of transmitting illness to other people.
- Install sneeze shields over buffet serving areas, if such serving systems are used.
- Consider instructing kitchen staff to serve food to workers in place of buffet-style systems
- Provide thin disposable gloves for any self-serve food areas to prevent staff from touching common utensils or food serving systems.
- Limit camp visitors to only those persons necessary for the operation of your workplace. Ensure all camp visitors are thoroughly oriented with your hygiene and illness-prevention program

#### 4) Staff behavior

- Discuss illness-prevention steps with your staff.
- Encourage staff to maintain healthy routines that support positive immune responses to all potential illness. This includes reducing sugar consumption, avoiding excess alcohol consumption, ensuring adequate sleep on a nightly basis, and maintaining good hygiene.
- Instruct staff to treat toilets and other shared facilities with respect, and to take steps to avoid contaminating common surfaces. Substandard conditions should be reported promptly.
- Instruct staff to wash hands prior to entering any dining or common area, and immediately after using bathrooms. Proper enforcement may be necessary.
- Instruct staff in proper hand-washing techniques, of lathered scrubbing for at least 20 seconds, rinsing and drying.
- Instruct staff to wash hands prior to entering trucks at the beginning and end of each day. Workers in the field should be instructed to carry additional water and hand soap for this purpose.
- Instruct workers to limit their contact with crowds and busy public areas on days off. Use of public washrooms should be limited and should always include proper hand-washing habits.

#### 5) Potential outbreak response

In the case of any suspected individual case or suspected exposure of COVID-19 in a work camp, the supervisor of the operation must immediately contact a Medical Health Officer for instructions. Given that conditions are changing and access to medical services may vary by area, it is critical that a proper authority is consulted in order to weigh the needs of the affected person(s) with any risk of transmission to other people or populations.

A list of Medical Health Officers is provided at the following link:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/bc-medical-health-officers.pdf>

The Public Health Authority in British Columbia can be reached by dialling 811.

- Employers must maintain family and emergency contact information for all staff.
- Employers should institute heightened hygiene and social-distancing measures in an any case of reported exposure among their staff.
- Workers must be encouraged to take sick days and to self-quarantine if potential symptoms emerge, and no works shall be pressured to stay at work.
- In the case of a suspected case of COVID-19, employers must inquire with Medical Health Officers about any challenges or risks associated with affected workers living in an outside environment such as a tent-based camp.
- Be prepared to communicate with all staff and with clients with respect to any potential camp or crew quarantine situation.