

Wood Buffalo INDUSTRIES



by Norma Ramage

Let's take an imaginary construction worker in Fort McMurray. Call him Joe and make him an ironworker. Joe works for several contractors to the area's three major oil sands plants: Suncor Energy Inc., Syncrude Canada Ltd. and Albian Sands Energy Inc.

When Joe works at Suncor, he is trained to meet that company's fall arrest safety standards. The following month when his job takes him to Syncrude, he undergoes a second fall arrest training program. And when he works at Albian Sands, he takes yet another fall arrest program.

The problem is that the training program for each plant is virtually identical, says Tom Smith, who oversees loss management and safety for Fort McMurray-based L. Robert Ent. People are getting the same training over and over. This kind of redundancy costs contractors and owners money.

"Individual training programs take between four and eight hours, hours when the employee isn't working on the job," explains Smith, who has an annual training budget of \$60,000 to \$70,000.

At least some of these additional costs are passed on to the companies. Since as many as 20,000 contract employees can be working at the three plants at any given time, the price tag is high for contractors and companies alike.

It's also difficult to track which workers have received which training, especially for smaller companies with limited resources. This can result in unnecessary retraining and more cost.

But money isn't the only problem, says Brad Koskowich, health and safety team leader at Albian Sands. Koskowich believes that making workers undergo multiple training programs can also

cause safety problems. "It's like a race. You can probably jump one hurdle safely, but if you have to jump 10 or 15, by the law of averages, you might

step on one of those hurdles and fall. We decided that we needed to set the safety bar equally across all three companies, and raise that bar at the same time."

That's why Suncor, Syncrude and Albian agreed last fall to establish the Oil Sands Safety Association. The vision of the Association was to work toward

"an incident-free workforce" through the introduction of agreed-upon safety training standards. The three companies invited representatives from government, contractors and labour to join the Association, and project teams were quickly formed to create the standards.

The Association completed its initial common standard – for fall protection – at the end of April. Standards for other safety programs will follow throughout the year.

When the standards have been established, contractors, unions and private companies who provide safety training can seek accreditation and certification to those standards. Says Smith, "Contractors will know that a person we have trained to these standards can work on all three sites."

Peter Dunfield, senior loss management advisor at Syncrude and an owner representative on the Association's three-member steering committee, says everyone involved has put in hundreds of volunteer hours to move the project ahead quickly. "The enthusiasm for this project is blowing me away. Everybody is pumped at the opportunity."

"Safety is the one issue that breaks down all barriers."



Image courtesy Syncrude Canada Ltd.

Set Common Standards

Gary Wagar, executive director of the Alberta Construction Safety Association, is equally enthusiastic about the standardized safety training. It's a "win-win" for all stakeholders, he says, with "no downside."

Although the face-to-face meetings began last fall, the idea of establishing common safety training standards has been around for some time. Contractors had been pushing the oil sands companies to create across-the-board standards similar to those successfully employed in the pulp mill industry.

Three years ago, industry and contractor representatives began discussing the creation of a regional safety training centre. They investigated a program Lambton College offered the oil industry in Sarnia, but concluded that a similar program wouldn't work for Fort McMurray's larger and more transient labour force. It became clear they needed a made-in-Alberta solution.

Finding that solution became Rick Everett's responsibility. Everett, who worked in Syncrude's Human and Organization Development department, was seconded to the project for four months.

Everett was challenged to develop:

- safety standards agreeable to all three plants
- an accreditation standard and recertification timeline
- a checklist that allows field leaders to test what is happening in the field to the standard
- a training and certification tracking system

Everett's original contract was later extended, and last January, the three companies signed an agreement creating and funding the non-profit Wood Buffalo Safety Association to develop safety training standards. Everett's first step was to create an advisory committee that included representatives of the three companies plus Alberta Workplace Health & Safety, Keyano College, the Alberta Construction Safety Association and the Alberta Building Trades Council. Then came a working group with representatives from the Association, trade unions and contractors. Finally, project teams were assigned to develop individual training standards.

The project came together quickly. "We got all 17 people on the advisory

committee into a room in September last year, and by December 18 all project teams were 80 to 100 per cent complete," Everett says.

The minimum for all of the Association's standards will be Workplace Health & Safety requirements, says Everett, "but the final, agreed-upon standards may be higher." Standards will also be a good fit with WHS's recently announced Work Safe Alberta initiative.

One of the keys to the Association's success, says Everett, is that all three companies are equal partners. Tim Gondek, environmental health and safety integration facilitator for Suncor, says everyone has made concessions. "The goal here isn't to force training standards into existing concepts developed by one or other of the companies. It's to find the best training standards that we can all agree to."

The Association has already identified over 50 programs that require common standards, so the project will be ongoing for at least a couple of years. As each standard is completed, it will be posted on the Association's Web site. After that, Everett hopes there will be buy-in from other companies in the region.



Image courtesy Syncrude Canada Ltd.

Since everything is working so smoothly, one question remains: Why wasn't this done years ago? Wagar offers a one-word answer: competition. "Something similar was tried in Fort Saskatchewan a dozen years ago but we couldn't get the owners to get together and agree."

Syncrude's Dunfield argues that competitiveness is no longer a factor. "Safety isn't a competitive thing. We're not giving away proprietary knowledge. We're working together to develop common safety and training standards that will benefit everybody."

Suncor's Gondek agrees. "Safety is the one issue that breaks down all barriers," he says.

Getting the three major players talking has resulted in some unanticipated agreements in other areas. For example, at one time Albion and Syncrude used amber vehicle lights, while Suncor preferred blue. Suncor recently switched to amber to provide consistency. "We see other opportunities to look at similar cross-company safety practices," says Gondek, "such as the permitting system."

Stakeholders are unanimous in their hope that the standards will eventually be accepted, not only at other oil sands projects, but also in other industries province-wide. Everett has already had calls from other organizations wanting to become accredited to the Association's standards. He says optimistically, "I think the opportunities are limitless."

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Resources

WEB LINKS

<http://www.syncrude.com/>

Syncrude home page

<http://www.suncor.com/bins/index.asp>

Suncor home page

<http://www.albiansands.com/albiansands/homepage.htm>

Albian Sands home page

<http://www.keyano.ca/mine/index.htm>

Keyano College Mine Operations program

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