

Dunedin man named training leader of the year

Making it as easy as possible for forestry workers to stay safe has earned a Dunedin man national recognition.

Neil Thomas, Manager of Forestsafe, was awarded the title of Training Leader of the Year 2009 by FITEC, the Forestry Industry's national training organisation at its annual award ceremony in Rotorua recently.

Viewed by the New Zealand forestry industry as one of the most highly respected trainers and assessors, he puts considerable effort into making sure forestry workers get the information they need.

For Mr Thomas health and safety is more than a contractual obligation; a positive health and safety culture has to form part of the organisation.

“Health and safety is more than just a box to tick, and for something the workers have to do if the boss is around; it's actually something that's second nature to everyday work processes. That's a shift in thinking; enforcement tells people what they do wrong, but not how to fix it. We not only want to show them how to do it, we make sure it's an essential part of the work culture.”

There are good reasons for that.

“We have a huge forestry industry in Otago and Southland, but despite risks there are few injuries – that good safety record is no accident. The health and safety component underpinning forestry work is unseen, but the industry takes its obligations seriously and puts the effort in, and that's really paid off over the last decade.”

This is backed up by the Southern Wood Council Chairman Grant Dodson, who reiterated that training and development is paramount to the industry. “Safety is encouraged at every level within our industry.”

“Neil is an excellent example to us all of what can be achieved and I commend him on his well deserved award.”

Forestsafe, run by Mr Thomas and wife Jackie, provides individuals in forestry with the systems and the skills to manage risk, through its health and safety co-ordination services, and through the apprentice training it provides.

Mr Thomas has developed an innovative Health and Safety Management System for helping forestry contractors meet their health and safety requirements – streamlining the process into practical daily, weekly and monthly steps to make it as easy as possible for them to integrate health and safety into their business.

He works with around 70 forestry contractors mainly in the South Island who log trees in most of the major forests including those owned by Ernslaw One, City Forests Ltd and Blakely Pacific. The system is also now being picked up nationally.

He's also passionate about hooking young people into the health and safety way as soon as they begin their forestry career, to the point that he's developed his own training approach to suit the learning style of the around 50 young apprentices & trainees he works with.

"There's no point in just giving people information, we need to find the right way to help them to understand and to see its importance, and to show them some practical ways of applying the information to everyday practice right from the start," he said.

Finding the right way has meant adapting learning systems and preparing training material to incorporate a lot of visual aids including DVDs and PowerPoint presentations, drawing on his considerable photo resource but using less of the text book approach. "A great photo of something done incorrectly in the forest, or a hazard, is a really effective way of getting a message across."

It's also meant making a comfortable learning environment for the apprentices together in a specially developed training room at his North Taieri premises, away from the forest, to make the most of group dynamics in the learning process.

Mr Thomas has even assisted some of his young charges with adult literacy training and support for dyslexia to make sure there are no barriers in getting the information over to them. "The system we have now recognised that people learn at different speeds and helps get them through individually."

He takes pleasure in seeing the apprentices' pride and sense of achievement in gaining their first framed certificate as they work their way through the courses.

Mr Thomas has recently also been involved in accident prevention work, attending an accident investigation course run by the Keil Centre from Scotland to look at the human factors behind accidents such as fatigue and issues at home.

Forestsafe's efforts were recognised by FITEC regional training advisor Phil Williams, who nominated Mr Thomas, saying his approach is enlightened. "Neil is regarded as a specialist in New Zealand; his thorough, quiet skills are very highly valued by the forestry industry."

Originally from western Southland, Mr Thomas started as a forestry worker with the NZ Forest Service, working his way up to senior hand before moving on to working for logging contractors. He then ran his own logging businesses, gaining firsthand knowledge of health and safety compliance, and has also worked for ACC as OSH Forestry Inspector for Otago and Southland.

He and Jackie had their three children moved to Otago in 2000, setting up Forestsafe in 2003 from his Taieri property. His role includes health and safety auditing and investigations of company and contractor accidents. He also reviews and writes New Zealand forestry qualifications.

He would eventually like to expand his health and safety systems to assist other industries manage hazards. It's an approach that will no doubt make the South Island a safer place.

The Southern Wood Council Inc was set up in 2001 to promote, encourage and coordinate the sustainable economic development of the forest products industry in Otago and Southland. One of a few truly independent groups of its type in New Zealand, it includes all the major forest owners within the region (ownership or management of over 140,000 hectares of production forests with an annual harvest of over 1.2 million m³ of wood), the larger wood processing and manufacturing companies, the port authorities, and each of the three economic development agencies from local councils.

**For further information contact Neil Thomas, 489-0609
Southern Wood Council chairman Grant Dodson on 03-467-7722.**