SAFETY, A COMMITMENT

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Safety is a commitment; a way of life at work and at home. In the workplace and at home, the commitment begins with each of us. We must of course have the support and commitment from those who direct our daily work. Likewise, we must lead by example, at work and at home. All of us have something we like to do that takes us away from routine, daily tasks. We must preserve our “quality of life” if we wish to participate in those things we like to do.

A commitment, as defined in most dictionaries, is an obligation, a promise and dedication. The obligation to work safely is based in expectations we have for ourselves. It is human nature to try and avoid any situation involving pain, yet many times we take short cuts that increase the likelihood we will become injured. The reasons we take short cuts are varied but include pressure to perform, recognition and one that can be addictive, for the adrenalin rush. The promise we make ourselves is that we are not going to be injured or hurt because we do not like pain. Particularly when we are younger, we have the feeling we are invincible. However, keeping this promise becomes extremely difficult when we lose our focus on the tasks at hand. Focus is most often lost when we are doing familiar tasks and become complacent, letting our minds “wander” or disengage. When our minds are disengaged, even repetitive, mundane tasks can become hazardous. Finally, we must have the dedication to utilize thought processes that place our quality of life as the first priority. Such dedication will evolve into a lifestyle which will in turn become a foundation for establishing a culture where safe work practices and safe living habits just “happen”.

In 2003, the supervisory, management and safety committee teams made a commitment at Hampton Lumber Mills Cowlitz Division. We committed to improving our safety performance. We made that commitment because we believe it is our moral and legal obligation to assure we provide a safe work environment for all our teammates. Providing a safe work environment pertains to the physical condition of our manufacturing operations as well as assuring all teammates are supported in safe work practices. We believe we have made significant progress in our quest to assist our teammates to preserve their quality of life. At the end of the calendar year 2002 we had an accident incident rate of 10.88 in the Cowlitz Division. At the end of the calendar year 2005 we had an accident incident rate of 4.76. Many factors have contributed to our ongoing success to improve our safety performance.

The initial effort for improvement involved, at that time, our Cowlitz Division Operations Manager, plant supervisors, safety committee members and myself, in the capacity as Division HR/Safety Manager. That initial effort began by addressing not only recordable accidents, but also any non-recordable injury, any near miss and any property damage. A team consisting of myself, the Division Operations Manager, the department supervisor and the department safety committee representative would meet with each individual involved in any of the aforementioned scenarios. Nearly all those involved in incidents were apprehensive at first regarding the meetings because the meetings occurred during operating hours in a highly visible location. The obvious thought process was an individual was probably going to receive some kind of disciplinary action as a result of
having an accident or incident. However, the purpose of these meetings was something all together different. The purpose of these meetings was to convey, to the individual involved in an incident, no disciplinary action would be involved in this meeting and the motive of those present was to try and identify the controllable items/actions that could have prevented the incident from occurring. In the first year of this effort, the aforementioned individuals addressed over 600 separate incidents. This commitment was successful because all involved believed in the process. To this day, this process continues, although the makeup of review teams varies from time to time.

Through the foregoing process, safety committee members have been empowered to establish and communicate safe work behaviors. Our philosophy states ownership for a safe work environment is a personal responsibility. Committee members have accepted that responsibility. The committee members conduct monthly safety training within their respective departments. They have been instrumental in the development of annual safety plans. They have accepted the responsibility to visit with team members through the course of the work day to identify areas of concern and opportunities for improvement and some have provided documentation, used as training guides, that convey safe work practices in a variety of entry level, production and maintenance positions. All members of the safety committee, as well as all team members, have received training that better enables each to successfully confront unsafe behaviors in a constructive, professional manner. Each team member is allowed and encouraged to approach any other team member observed engaged in an unsafe work practice to coach and further train that individual. Each individual has their own style regarding how they approach a teammate, but in every instance, constructive feedback is stressed as a necessity.

Just as important as identifying opportunities for improvement in safety performance, it is important to recognize improvement, in individuals, departments and facilities. We do take the time to celebrate achieving safety goals, as individuals, departments and entire facilities in a number of ways. A simple thank you for following safe work practices, from a constituent, supervisor or manager is also emphasized. We try very hard to place more emphasis on safe work practices, through positive reinforcement, than we do through a disciplinary process. However, we do not hesitate to use negative reinforcement when such is needed. Before using negative reinforcement, we review the assets we have provided an individual so we may be assured we have set that person up for success, not failure. If the answer is “yes”, we have set an individual up for success and that individual elects to ignore or decline that input, then and only then do we refer to negative reinforcement.

You might ask how all of the foregoing applies to drying lumber. The answer to such is quite simple. To be able to dry lumber effectively, a human must be involved at some point in the drying process. To achieve efficiency in lumber drying, it makes sense to have that task accomplished by the individual trained in that discipline rather than a substitute filling in for the trained individual. When a trained individual is assigned a particular task, the risk of injury or loss of quality of life is greatly reduced, as long as that person maintains their focus on the tasks at hand. By far, our experience has been an increased exposure to injury, for our team members, when an individual is involved in performing non-routine tasks.

The foregoing provides some insight regarding “A Commitment” for safety performance improvement in the Cowlitz Division. We continually seek opportunities for improvement in our processes with an emphasis we will preserve quality of life. It is also important to note we have not sacrificed performance in the other two areas of importance in any manufacturing operation, quality and production. The commitment to improved safety performance has created a pattern that transcends the other two areas of importance, so
much so that while we have improved our safety performance, we have continued to establish new production records on almost a monthly basis while maintaining customer directed quality.

Safety performance has become a commitment because all involved understand the obligations and promises we have made in regard to working safely. Our dedication continues on a daily basis in the Cowlitz Division. We all understand the commitment, for our company, our families and ourselves so that each of us can enjoy our own quality of life.