

Snow Clearing Procedures Weren't Safe: Judge



Operating a provincially-run cable ferry in Nova Scotia was only part of Donald LeBlanc's job. The part of his job that killed him in February 2003 had nothing to do with running a ferry.

LeBlanc, 38, was using a tractor to clear snow and ice from a ferry ramp in Englishtown, NS, when the tractor slid off the ramp and threw him into icy water. A recent inquiry into his death resulted in some strong recommendations that supervisors everywhere would be well advised to heed.

Judge Peter Ross, who led the inquiry, stated that LeBlanc was "not functioning in a safe environment" for several reasons. First, LeBlanc was not fully competent to operate a tractor under snow and ice conditions – especially a machine that did not have chains on its tires. Tellingly, the person who trained LeBlanc to drive the tractor would not provide snow and ice training because the site was deemed too dangerous.

Second, LeBlanc was not wearing a survival suit and did not have a lifejacket. Third, he had received no cold-water survival training. While a dive team was available nearby, the decision was made to wait for an RCMP dive team. The team arrived eight hours after LeBlanc entered the water and had to stop searching soon afterwards because of darkness.

LeBlanc's body was finally recovered several months later.

Ross's report recommended that provincial employees receive better safety training and that more rigorous hazard assessments be undertaken at provincial worksites. Ross noted that a decision was made in 1999 to discontinue using a private operator to plow snow on the ferry ramp.

The judge recommended that if ferry operators are going to continue to be expected to plow snow as part of their jobs, they need to have plenty of experience beforehand and amass a minimum number of hours doing so each year to maintain their competence. They should also undertake periodic refresher training and testing, according to Ross.

He also recommended that lifejacket use be mandatory among tractor operators in Englishtown and that they receive cold-water survival training. They should also be able to swim. The judge also urged the Nova Scotia government and 911 administrators to consider the need for implementing a water rescue capability in Victoria County.

Most people working near water never expect to end up submerged, but these types of incidents aren't as rare as people might think. And if the worker cannot swim and does not have a lifejacket, he or she can drown in any type of weather. As a supervisor you must consider such hazards and take steps to reduce them.