



RIGHT: Wiremu and Marsella Edmonds have presented their inspiring safety presentation to nearly 250 forestry managers, foresters, timber farmers and contractors in Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal, in an effort to encourage members of the industry to stand up and speak in situations where safety is threatened.



# Forestry industry called to stand in the gap

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Every day, many of 200,000 to 260,000 people directly employed in the forestry and the processing industries in South Africa go to work and face dangerous situations that could affect their own safety and that of their teams. Some statistics indicate that at least one in 120 forestry workers is seriously injured each year.

Effective, pro-active safety management is good business practice. A safe operation is an efficient operation because it reduces potential loss, increases production, improves the working environment and adds to an overall improvement in worker attitude and morale.

The Constitution of South Africa affords every person 'the right to an environment that is safe and not harmful to their well-being' while the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 states that 'every employer shall provide and maintain, as far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of the employee'. So, the imperative is clear

and the principles are well-prescribed and sound. What is really needed is the will.

At a recent motivational talk by Wiremu Lee Edmonds and his wife Marsella, hosted by the Institute for Commercial Forestry Research (ICFR), we were reminded that it is the responsibility of every individual to step forward and speak up – to "Stand in the Gap" when it comes to our safety and that of our colleagues.

Their heart-warming and inspirational talk was originally given as the keynote address at the recent Focus on Forest Engineering held at the Wittenberg Church near Piet Retief. So inspiring was their talk, and as a measure of the importance of safety in our business, Sappi, Mondi, Bell and John Deer, with help from the ICFR, joined forces to enable the presentation to be given again to nearly 250 forestry managers, foresters, timber farmers and contractors in Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal.

The talk focused on the couple's personal experiences, including the tragic loss of their son in a logging accident 18 months ago. It was this incident that changed their lives and started them on a journey of sharing their message. Their open and honest presentation is focused on their belief in the critical need for all of us to put safety first and foremost in all aspects of forestry operations.

Edmonds worked in the New Zealand forestry industry for a number of years, first in silviculture then later in

the logging industry. After a career change, he became involved in social services, working with many high risk young people and their families. He describes himself as having a very strong value base and believes the most powerful qualification is the one that is written upon his heart.

His background and experience within the forestry industry has allowed him to take the lead in overseeing Team Ones Health and Safety Programmes with some of the largest forestry companies in New Zealand. Edmonds is passionate about changing unsafe work practices within this industry; and has become a sort after keynote speaker around the country and overseas.

The message “Standing in the Gap” is a simple one – it is about having courage to stand up and speak when you are in a situation where your own safety and the safety of those around you is threatened. Each of us has a responsibility to defend and protect our safety. We need to find ways to communicate and ensure that the message is heard.

Companies and organisations in the industry invest millions of rands into improving infrastructure and working conditions, and adopting and prescribing processes and protocols that address risk in all areas.

As an industry, we need to continue to focus on people and on safety in all aspects of our business. Forestry is by its nature, often a dangerous occupation, and, since many tasks are performed outdoors, workers frequently experience difficult working conditions. Management of safety and working environments is a special need. All forestry companies, of necessity, comply with the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and most major companies participate in the NOSA programme. Safety standards have steadily improved in many companies.

Many of the forestry companies are already actively involved in a number of initiatives aimed at raising awareness and keeping staff informed about safe working procedures, the correct way to use equipment and the protective clothing needed. Suppliers such as Husqvarna, Stihl, Bell and John Deere actively support these initiatives, and training service providers offer training through relevant courses.

However, we all know that one serious accident is one too many and workers in the industry express ongoing concern regarding health and safety provisions. Continuous improvement is needed; there is a long way to go in ensuring uniform minimum health and safety standards in the forests and the wood processing industries. Each of us can contribute by stepping up and “standing in the gap”. ■