Logging train shutdown another blow to Woss community
Katie DeRosa / Times Colonist

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Aerial view of Woss, on northern Vancouver Island.
Photograph By Wikipedia

Western Forest Products employees say the shutdown of the Englewood logging train is a major blow to the North Island community of Woss, which is still reeling from a derailment in April that killed three logging workers.

Employees are upset that they found out they are losing their jobs through social media.

“It’s just a big blow,” said Robin Kenny, a 33-year-old husband and father of three who has been working on the railway for five years. He followed in the footsteps of his father, who started in the 1980s.

“It was a boyhood dream of mine to work on a railroad and getting this job made me happy.”

Kenny grew up in Woss and bought a house there two years ago in the hopes work on the logging train would provide well-paying, steady income for the next few years.

Instead, Western Forest Products announced Tuesday that the oldest logging train in North America would be shutting down. The company said it will work with the union to help some workers transition to other jobs. About 15 of the 34 railway employees will lose their jobs.
Kenny said he’s young enough to be re-trained and might be able to work on the logging trucks that will now be delivering wood to sorts and mills. However, he worries about the future of some of the older employees.

Larry Knutson has worked on the railway for 30 years, starting out as a second brakeman and moving up to conductor in 1995.

“Railroading was my life. It was my passion,” said Knutson, 65. He grew up in Woss and remembers steam locomotives running through the community, which piqued his fascination with trains.

The shutdown came as a shock to Knutson, who said he’s not ready to retire. “It’s just a horrible way to end what, for me, was the best job I’ve ever had in my life,” Knutson said.

The train has been shut down since April 20 after three people were killed and two injured when a rail car loaded with logs rolled down the tracks and collided with a track maintenance car. The collision sent logs spilling across the tracks, killing Roland Gaudet, Clement Reti and Jake Galeazzi.

The Transportation Safety Board, WorkSafe B.C. and the B.C. Safety Authority are investigating, but no reports have been released.

Western Forest Products said the decision to shut down the rail line is not related to the derailment, but is a business decision to use trucks, which provide more flexibility.

Vanessa Kaspar, Gaudet’s step-daughter, said the news is a double blow to workers who lost friends in the derailment and now have been left jobless.

“My heart sank for the families living there [in Woss] who depend on those jobs,” she said. “Dad was always concerned about jobs in Woss and his co-workers, they were like family.”

Kaspar said her life hasn’t been the same without her step-dad, who was her best friend. “It’s been really heart-breaking.”

Gaudet’s sister, Marian Campbell, said in a statement: “All I can say is that after suffering such a horrific incident in April, this news can only be devastating to the Woss community.”

At a meeting with the company on Wednesday, employees asked why they had to find out about the railway closure on Facebook rather than from Western Forest Products directly.

“They were very angry about the way they were told, they were very frustrated about everything,” Kenny said.

Amy Spencer, a Western Forest Products spokeswoman, said the publicly traded company was unable to release any information until the financial markets were closed. At that time, a
statement was filed and only then was the company allowed to release the information elsewhere.

“We tried to reach all employees as quickly as possible,” said Spencer, but added that some were not immediately reachable.

Dan Jorgenson, business agent with United Steelworkers Local 1-1937, said the feeling among the employees is “anger and resignation.”

“One man described it as the light at the end of the tunnel went out,” he said.

Jorgenson questioned why it took six months after the derailment for the company to announce the closing. “The crew has been waiting for six months to hear if they have a job,” Jorgenson said, adding that most employees are already halfway through their employment insurance.

The Englewood Railway is a 90-kilometre logging line that runs from Vernon Lake, through Woss, past Nimpkish Lake Provincial Park to Beaver Cove.

David Rushton, Woss’s regional district director, said the closing of the logging train is “the end of an era.”

The shutdown had been rumoured for a long time, Rushton said. But that doesn’t make it any easier for the tiny community of 200 people.

“We got knocked down, we were halfway back up, and now we’re knocked down again.”


Police investigating possibility of criminality in Woss rail disaster

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Police say they are looking for evidence of an intentional criminal act or the presence of criminal negligence after a train derailed on north Vancouver Island on Thursday.

Two workers died at the scene and a third died in hospital overnight. Two others remain in hospital.

A train carrying Western Forest Products personnel and material derailed around 8:45 a.m. in Woss, a hamlet about 130 kilometres north of Campbell River.

RCMP were in Woss throughout the day Friday investigating the scene that stretches at least two kilometres. Apr. 21, 2017 (CTV Vancouver Island)

RCMP were in Woss throughout the day Friday investigating the scene that stretches at least two kilometres.

Officers say it’s still early in the investigation, but they are working to determine if there is the presence of criminal negligence.

“If we determine ultimately that there is criminality we will retain the lead in that investigation,” said RCMP Island District senior investigator Dave Hall. “If we believe it’s related to some other non-criminal incident we’ll turn that over to the correct authorities.”

The derailment has devastated the tight-knit community of just under 200 people.

The safety director with United Steel Workers Local 1-1937 says the workers are all long-term employees and some have been with the company for more than 40 years.

“Members are just trying to do what we always do when this happens, is console each other and try and get through it,” Jack Miller said.

According to the safety director, critical incident stress workers travelled to the community on Thursday to help anyone who needed it.

“We’re waiting for the site to be released and then steelworkers, Western Forest Products, WorkSafeBC ... we’ll do a joint investigation and come up with what we have to do to stop it from happening again,” Miller said.

He added that a locomotive was not involved in the derailment.

"I’ve seen most of the site, haven’t talked to the two individuals that were operating the reload as to whether it was the actual line of cars that they were loading that let loose or sometimes there’s loads parked off to the side,” Miller said.

A team from Western Forest Products and the company's CEO Don Demens met with families, employees and community members in Woss on Friday.
"Western Forest Products Inc. and United Steelworkers Local 1-1937 will continue to focus efforts on working together to ensure that the families, workers and all affected are supported," Demens said in a press release. "The well-being and safety of our employees and the communities we operate is paramount."

The company closed all Timberlands operations on Friday with respect for employees and their families, Demens added.

Officials say the names of the victims will not be released.

Police have talked with some of those involved in the derailment and ask that anyone with information contact the Sayward RCMP detachment.


No criminal charges in Woss train derailment
Katie DeRosa / Times Colonist

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There will be no criminal charges laid in connection with the train derailment that killed three and injured two in Woss last week, the RCMP said Monday.

The train was in a reload yard Thursday morning when it suddenly rolled down the tracks and collided with a track maintenance car where the five men were working. The collision caused logs to spill across the railway tracks.

Mounties have ruled out obvious criminality or criminal negligence, so the investigation will now be led by the Transportation Safety Board and WorkSafe B.C.

Western Forest Products and the union representing forestry workers will be starting their on-scene investigation today.

Four WorkSafe B.C. officers were on site Monday and are preparing a site-safety plan to be able to conduct the next stage of the investigation, said Trish Chernecki, a spokeswoman for the agency.

Western Forest Products employees based on Woss are being given time off and many spent Monday meeting with counsellors for critical-incident debriefing.
Dozens of forestry workers had to spend hours working to pull logs off one of the trapped and injured workers. They had to do this work knowing that some of their co-workers had died and others were seriously injured.

“It was an amazing feat ... what they did, it was heroic,” said Chris Cinkant, safety coordinator for United Steelworkers Local 1-1937.

One man remains in hospital after multiple surgeries and another has been released and is recovering at home, Cinkant said.

Roland Gaudet, a 59-year-old grandfather who had been with Western Forest Products for 27 years, died at the scene. Woss Fire Chief Brad Galeazzi’s son also died at the scene.

Clement Reti was airlifted to Victoria General Hospital, but died of his injuries.

The union has said mechanical failure, not human error caused the train to lose control, but this has not been confirmed by Transportation Safety Board investigators.

There have not been any recent fatal accidents involving the Englewood Railway, a 90-kilometre logging line that runs from Vernon Lake, through Woss, past Nimpkish Lake Provincial Park to Beaver Cove.