



Jamie Plesh, Safety Coordinator, Arnason Industries Ltd.

BY BARB FELDMAN

Jamie Plesh admits that when he began working for Arnason Industries Ltd. seven years ago, he knew little about workplace safety; his college degree was in sales and marketing. But with on-the-job learning and the WORKSAFELY™ programs offered by the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association (MHCA), he quickly got up to speed.

“I think I’ve taken every workplace safety course at [MHCA] at least once,” he says, “some of them two or three times.”

General contractor Arnason Industries builds, installs and repairs water and sewer treatment plants, lift stations and bridges and also does soil remediation, winter road construction and aggregate crushing. The company employs a workforce of 80 to 100, depending on the season and amount of work, on projects mainly on northern Manitoba First Nations, but also elsewhere in the province and in northern Ontario and Saskatchewan.

As Safety Coordinator, Plesh is responsible for the entire safety program. He develops policies and procedures, manages projects, tracks and manages Workers’ Compensation Board claims, prepares safe work and emergency response plans and paperwork and manages Arnason’s Certificate of Recognition (COR™) program.

Having your supervisors trained is key

Plesh conducts some jobsite inspections, “but having your supervisors trained is key,” he says. “A lot of the groundwork is done by the person who’s in charge of the jobsite.”

Trenching and excavations, underground sewer and water piping, working in confined spaces and mechanical work is all inherently dangerous, he observes, and all present their own hazards.

“Something new is always more dangerous because guys aren’t used to it and have a lot less training,” he says, describing as an example the potential hazards of aggregate crushing, which Arnason Industries began doing on a larger scale a few years ago.

“The machines themselves have a lot of moving pulleys, belts and pieces you can get easily caught in. And you’re producing a massive amount of dust, lowering visibility.”

For this and other jobs Arnason conducts on-site orientation programs and has established a checklist of company rules, procedures and policies. There are safe-job procedures for how to conduct different types of work.

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“Safety procedures are something that need to be established right away for any new hire – whether they’re coming to work with us in the office in Winnipeg or anywhere up north,” Plesh says.

He notes that a lot of advance safety planning needs to be done for projects in remote areas and especially for emergency situations. Training in first aid procedures, preparation and communications – even having phone numbers handy – are all important. Although most First Nations have nursing stations for minor injuries, he notes, “if something is serious enough, we need to get a Medevac to fly them out.”

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Managing jobs safely is the most important of all, Plesh says.

“The big thing for me is orientation before a big job begins and then trying to prevent incidents before they occur,” he says, “because not only can it harm the person who’s working but it costs the company money in claims.”

The company usually shuts down just before Christmas to do a two-day mandatory training session for all company personnel who are brought into MHCA’s Winnipeg office from across the province.

“And throughout the year, when things come up, I’ll call [MHCA] and they’ll send somebody out to train our guys,” he explains.

Plesh has special appreciation for the assistance of Greg Huff, Phil McDaniel and Elaine Alvis, Arnason Industries’ key Safety Advisors.

“We’re almost always training employees on-site,” he says. “When we need to get training done on-site it’s usually Phil and Elaine – we’ll fly them to the site so they get to see conditions firsthand. They are excellent to work with and generally go out with no questions asked.”

Over the past decade, Arnason Industries and Plesh have relied on the expertise of MHCA’s WORKSAFELY™ Program to ensure the safety of their employees.

“We do a lot with [MHCA] – not just myself, but the company. We outsource a lot of our training to MHCA. We say, ‘Let the professionals do it!’” he explains.

“And our safety record has improved vastly over the past 10 years. We’re becoming a leader in safety.” 