

Learning from Tragedy in Alberta Crane Fatality and Building Safer Workplaces in Canada



Case Summary

Alberta fined 3 companies a total of \$1.243 million for OHS violations leading to the death of a heavy equipment technician who fell after being hit by a piece of equipment suspended from a crane while conducting shovel maintenance duties. Suncor Energy Services Inc. was fined \$495,000 after pleading guilty to failing to ensure that sharp edges on loads being hoisted were guarded to prevent damage to the rigging. Mining equipment company Joy Global was fined \$374,000 for failing to ensure the worker's health and safety. NCSG Crane & Heavy Haul Services Ltd. was also fined \$374,000 for failing to ensure a hazard assessment was repeated when a new work process was introduced [Suncor Energy Services Inc., Joy Global (Canada) Ltd., and NCSG Crane & Heavy Haul Services Ltd., Govt. Press Release, March 28, 2025].

Why This Case Matters

For OHS managers, the Alberta crane fatality is more than a tragic news story. It is a wake-up call that shows how multiple layers of responsibility can break down at once. Rigging procedures, hazard assessments, refresher training, and supervisory oversight all intersected in a way that left a worker exposed. The result was not just one life lost, but three companies fined over a million dollars collectively, along with reputational damage that will linger long after the penalties are paid.

The questions this case raises are not abstract. How do we know that our rigging practices are safe and standardized? Are our workers competent, not just trained once but refreshed as processes change? Do our hazard assessments account for evolving methods, and are they repeated when conditions shift? And perhaps most importantly, do we have systems in place to ensure that these safeguards are more than words in a manual, but active practices lived out daily on the worksite?

This article unpacks these questions, with a focus on lessons for OHS managers across Canada. It draws from real cases, regulatory differences across provinces, and the recurring challenges of training, competency, and auditing.

The Layers of Responsibility in a Complex Job

Rigging and crane operations are inherently high risk. Loads are suspended overhead, often heavy, awkward, or sharp-edged, and a single failure can have catastrophic consequences. In this Alberta case, sharp edges damaged rigging equipment, and the suspended load struck a technician. The fact that three separate companies were fined shows how responsibility for safety in complex jobs is shared across contractors, equipment

suppliers, and site owners.

This shared responsibility is where many OHS programs struggle. Each company often assumes the other has covered certain bases. Equipment suppliers may assume the employer will provide full training. Employers may assume contractors will redo hazard assessments. Contractors may assume the site owner has ensured safe processes. Unless those assumptions are tested and verified, gaps emerge. The law in Canada makes clear that every party with control over work has obligations, not just the direct employer.

Competency and Training in High-Risk Tasks

One of the clearest lessons is that competency is not a one-time event. Across jurisdictions, OHS legislation requires that workers performing specialized tasks be "competent" or "qualified" depending on the wording of the province or federal regulation.

Competency goes beyond attending a training session. It requires that the worker has the knowledge, training, and experience to perform the task safely. In Ontario, for example, the definition is strict: a competent worker must know the OHS law that applies to the work, understand the hazards, and be able to organize the work safely. Alberta's definition also emphasizes the ability to work safely without supervision. BC and Yukon use the term "qualified" instead of "competent," but the principle is the same: training alone is not enough.

In crane and rigging work, competency includes not just operating equipment but recognizing hazards such as sharp edges that could damage slings, understanding load limits, and knowing when conditions require reassessment. Employers must document this competency, not simply assume it. Training

records, refresher courses, and demonstrations of understanding are all part of compliance.

The crane fatality case highlights that even large and experienced companies can fall short. Joy Global failed to ensure the worker's health and safety. This is a broad charge, but in the context of crane and rigging, it often comes down to whether the worker was adequately prepared and supported for the task at hand.

The Role of Hazard Assessments and Change Management

Another key failure was the lack of repeated hazard assessments when a new work process was introduced. Hazard assessments are not static documents. They are meant to evolve with the work. In this case, NCSG Crane & Heavy Haul Services Ltd. was fined for not ensuring that a hazard assessment was repeated. That detail is significant. It means that while some form of assessment may have been done initially, the process was not revisited when conditions changed.

Canadian OHS regulations consistently require hazard assessments to be living processes. Alberta's OHS Code specifies that employers must identify hazards, assess risks, and implement controls. Similar requirements exist across provinces. But in practice, many workplaces treat hazard assessments as paperwork completed once and filed away.

Change management is the real test. Any time new equipment, processes, or work methods are introduced, the hazard assessment must be redone. This is not just a regulatory checkbox. It is a safeguard against the kind of blind spots that led to this tragedy. A sharp edge on a load might not seem like a new hazard, but if the rigging method changes, the hazard picture changes too.

The Audit Connection

Safety audits are often viewed as annual or semi-annual events, but they also serve a deeper role. A well-structured OHS audit tests whether hazard assessments are being repeated, whether competency training is being documented, and whether procedures on paper are actually applied in the field.

As highlighted in audit guidance, audits should not be confused with inspections. Inspections look at conditions in the moment. Audits evaluate whether systems work. In this Alberta case, an audit could have identified gaps: were hazard assessments updated regularly, were rigging practices reviewed for evolving risks, and were refresher trainings linked to changes in process? If the answer to any of those was no, corrective actions could have been taken before disaster struck.

JHSC Oversight and Worker Involvement

Another angle Canadian OHS managers must consider is the role of the Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) or safety representative. In most jurisdictions, workplaces over a certain size must have a JHSC or Rep, and these bodies are meant to act as internal watchdogs. They have the authority to review hazard assessments, recommend training, and ensure worker concerns are heard.

If the JHSC at this site had been fully engaged, they could have asked whether the hazard assessment for the shovel maintenance process was updated, or whether workers were trained in recognizing rigging hazards specific to the task. The law even gives them the right to inspect processes and recommend changes. But committees can only be effective if they are trained and supported. That means employers need to

invest in proper JHSC certification and refresher training, which varies by jurisdiction but is required in most provinces.

Training is Not Enough Without Refresher and Verification

Training often fails because it is seen as a one-time event. Workers may attend a course when hired, but then work practices evolve while the training remains static. Competency audits stress that refresher training must occur whenever work processes change, not just on a fixed calendar schedule.

In this Alberta case, shovel maintenance duties likely changed with new equipment or methods. A refresher session focused on new rigging hazards could have prevented the fatality. Supervisors and OHS managers must therefore view training as dynamic. They need to ask: does this new process change the way hazards present themselves? If so, have workers been updated and tested on that knowledge?

Documentation is critical. Inspectors will ask for training records, including when training was provided, by whom, what it covered, and when it was last refreshed. They will also ask workers directly to describe hazards and procedures. If the worker cannot answer, the employer may face penalties even if training technically occurred.

Shared Liability Across Employers, Contractors, and Suppliers

One striking feature of the Alberta case is that fines were issued to three different companies: the site owner, the equipment supplier, and the crane services contractor. This reinforces a point sometimes underestimated in OHS management. Liability is shared. If you control equipment, processes, or

workers, you have obligations.

Canadian courts and regulators increasingly apply this principle. A supplier cannot wash its hands by saying the employer should have trained workers. A contractor cannot claim it was only following site procedures. The law requires due diligence by every party with authority over the work.

For OHS managers, this means coordination with contractors and suppliers is not optional. Pre-job meetings, joint hazard assessments, and clear agreements on training responsibilities are essential. Otherwise, as seen here, each party can be held accountable after the fact.

Building a Culture Where Audits and Training Work Together

The practical question is: How can OHS managers prevent their workplaces from repeating the aforementioned mistakes? The answer lies in creating an integrated culture where training, hazard assessments, and audits are not isolated functions but connected parts of the same safety system.

A robust OHS program ensures that:

- Workers in high-risk jobs are identified and assessed for competency.
- Training is refreshed whenever tasks or processes change.
- Hazard assessments are repeated when new work methods are introduced.
- JHSCs are trained, empowered, and actively reviewing processes.
- Safety audits are used not just to meet annual requirements but to test the strength of the system in adapting to change.

When these pieces work together, the result is resilience.

Hazards are caught before they cause harm, workers remain capable and confident, and companies avoid the financial and reputational costs of OHS failures.

Regulatory Differences Across Canada

Because this article is for Canadian OHS managers, it is important to note that while the principles are consistent, the specific requirements vary.

- **Ontario** defines "competent" workers in especially strict terms, requiring knowledge of the law and the ability to organize work. Ontario also mandates JHSC certification training for at least one worker and one management member.
- **Alberta** requires competent workers to be able to work safely with minimal supervision and has explicit requirements for hazard assessments under its OHS Code.
- **British Columbia** and **Yukon** use the term "qualified" instead of "competent," but the expectations are similar. BC also requires JHSC members to receive training within six months of selection.
- **Federal jurisdiction** and the **maritime provinces** have their own terminology and training standards, but all require some form of competency and hazard assessment.

Understanding these differences is essential for national employers or those operating across provincial borders. A program that is compliant in Alberta may not meet Ontario's stricter competency requirements.

The Human Side of Compliance

Beyond regulations, fines, and audits, there is the human side. The technician in Alberta lost his life. His family and co-workers will live with that loss forever. The fines levied

against the companies may improve practices in the future, but they cannot undo the tragedy.

This underscores why OHS managers must treat competency and hazard assessments not as paperwork but as lifelines. Workers rely on their employers to ensure they return home safe each day. A lapse in refresher training or a missed hazard reassessment is not just a regulatory gap. It is a risk to someone's life.

Conclusion

The Alberta crane fatality case is a sobering reminder of how layered responsibilities can unravel when hazard assessments are not repeated and training is not refreshed. For Canadian OHS managers, the takeaways are clear. Competency must be ongoing, not one-time. Hazard assessments must adapt to change. JHSCs must be trained and active. Safety audits must probe systems, not just conditions. And all parties with control over work share liability.

By building integrated systems that connect training, audits, and worker participation, Canadian workplaces can prevent future tragedies. The goal is not simply to avoid fines but to create resilient safety cultures where every worker is competent, every process is assessed, and every life is protected.