

INDUSTRY ALERT

CRITICAL INJURY

Cutter suffers multiple injuries from sudden fall of hung-up tree

What happened?

A chainsaw operator and skidder operator were thinning red pine. Two trees the chainsaw operator had recently cut failed to fall. The chainsaw operator decided to cut a third tree to make room for the skidder operator to push the other two trees down, but it became hung-up in the other two trees. It eventually fell on its own, striking the approaching skidder without causing serious damage.

When the skidder operator first attempted to push over the two other trees, they became hung-up. As the skidder operator repositioned the skidder for another try, the chainsaw operator began to cut a fourth tree. While that tree was being cut, the two hung-up trees suddenly fell. One of them struck the cutter on the back, causing spinal damage, broken ribs and a lacerated liver.

Why did it happen?

Calling in a skidder to take down a cut tree left standing was the right response to the situation, but the cutter continued to work inside the danger zone while two trees remained precariously hung-up. A report on the incident indicated that the wind had become stronger, which increased the danger to the cutter from the hung-up trees..

How can it be prevented?

The 20-year-old cutter had received his Professional Chainsaw Operator (PCO) certification four months prior to the incident. Among other things, the PCO program emphasizes the importance of respecting the danger-zone rule at all times in cut/skid logging: When a cutter is working, there should be a separation of at least 60 metres (200 feet) or two treelengths between the cutter and any other worker, regardless of whether that other worker is another cutter or a skidder operator. Had the danger zone rule been followed when the skidder operator was trying to push over the hung-up tree, the cutter would have been out of harm's way.

The PCO program also explains that cut trees left standing and hung-up trees must be dealt with immediately before any other work can proceed. Both types of trees can fall without warning, especially if a wind is blowing. In this incident, the cutter should not have cut a second tree after the first tree failed to fall, nor should he have cut a third and fourth tree until the first had one had been safely pushed over.

This incident clearly shows that safety training alone is not enough to ensure that work is done safely. The safe procedures and work practices outlined in safety training courses will have the desired effect on the job only if they are practised, monitored and enforced on a daily basis.

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