

INDUSTRY ALERT

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CRITICAL INJURY

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Sawmill worker's lower leg broken when log slips off pulp hook

What happened?

A sawmill worker went to the bottom of a stairway between the top deck and the operator's booth to clean up short logs that had been removed from the in-feed decks because of broken fibre. Using a pulp hook (a curved steel hook with a wooden cross handle) the worker grabbed a few logs and slid them to where they could be lowered to the bottom level with a crane.

One four-foot (1.2-metre) log with a diameter of 10 inches (25 centimetres) was standing on end. The worker hooked this log with the pulp hook, then began to move backward up the steps with his left hand on the handrail for pulling leverage. When he pulled the log toward him with his right hand the pulp hook came out of the log, causing the log to free-fall. It struck him on his lower left leg. When the worker tried to walk on his leg, he heard a crack a few inches above his ankle and felt a sharp pain. He was transferred by ambulance to the hospital where X-rays confirmed a fractured fibia in his left leg.

Why did it happen?

The worker had positioned himself in the direct path of the falling log when he was pulling on the log with the pulp hook.

How can it be prevented?

The company's employees had been trained to pull to the side rather than toward themselves when using pulp hooks or pike poles. This technique keeps workers out of the path of a log if they lose control of it. After the incident, the company reviewed its lifting, pulling and pushing guidelines with the injured worker.

Another way of preventing this type of injury is to reduce the number of situations in which a worker is required to manually work at close quarters with logs that have been removed from the in-feed deck. After the incident, the company initiated a review to determine the source of the broken fibre. The purpose of the review was to try to reduce the number of damaged logs that need to be removed from the infeed deck.

Another alternative, which the company looked into after this incident, was the possible installation of a chute that would enable damaged logs to be removed from the in-feed deck area without the need to manually guide them.

The key to preventing injuries of this type is to try to limit the situations when workers have to manually move or guide logs in high-risk areas, and to make sure workers have been trained (and refreshed as necessary) on the proper techniques when working near logs anywhere in the mill.

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Although the description of circumstances arises from an actual situation, this Industry Alert does not reflect the final analysis of the situation, nor is it meant to assign blame on the part of any person or member firm. For further information, contact OFSWA at 705-474-7233. For details on Ministry of Labour prosecutions regarding recent health and safety incidents in Ontario workplaces, visit www.labour.gov.on.ca and click on "News Releases".