

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Two Tree Strikes in Two Days

Date: July 28-29, 2019

Location: Chandalar River Fire #349,
Cornucopia Complex, Alaska

***“No matter how minimal the task –
don’t go alone.” - Injured Firefighter***

First Incident July 28

The Chandalar River Fire #349 included large portions of indirect line that needed to be burned out. Conditions for burning were not always favorable. After all the major line was put in and prepped, crews were mostly waiting for the right conditions for a firing operation.

On this day, an Interagency Hotshot Crew was assigned to fall trees along a section of black edge. As part of this effort, several saw teams set out to fall trees using a leapfrog approach. After the first bit of cutting, one of the saw teams shut off their saw to drink some water and talk about the next section. Suddenly, a burned tree from the black fell without a sound. Crewmembers nearby shouted “Watch Out!”

The tree struck a glancing blow to one of the individuals. The tree mostly hit the firefighter’s pack, but did so with such force that it knocked him to the ground.

Fellow crewmembers came over to help. The individual struck by the tree was walking around and said he was fine. A moment later, another tree fell near one of the other saw teams. The saw teams decided to regroup and talk over their configuration. They all walked back to the rest of the crew and told the overhead about the tree strike.



**Photo taken near the area where
the accident occurred.**

“It took a little while for me to even figure out what happened.”

Injured Firefighter

The crew EMT began an assessment. As time passed, the individual hit by the tree began to feel more pain. At one point, he had a shooting pain down through his leg. The crew EMT advised transporting the patient to the hospital. A “Green” medical response was initiated through the Division Supervisor. The paramedic assigned to the Division began heading to the scene.

Other crews in the area converged and helped with evacuation efforts by preparing a helispot. The individual struck by the tree was packaged on a backboard and carried by several crews to the helispot. He was flown to Fort Yukon



Photo shows the shallow root base of a white spruce that was easily consumed when the ground fire passed through this stand. (This is not the tree that was involved in either of these two tree-strike injury incidents.)

and transported by fixed-wing aircraft to Fairbanks for evaluation at the hospital. The injured firefighter was released to light duty with no major injuries.

Lesson from the Person Hit by Tree

Work in Groups

✓ ALWAYS have a buddy present. The firefighter who was struck by the tree emphasized how important it was for him to have folks right there with him when this unexpected event occurred. He was so grateful for his buddies being there to take charge of the situation and take care of him. He was certain this would have been a much different experience had he been alone.

Second Incident July 29

A Type 2 IA Crew was assigned to mop up along the edge of the previous day's firing operation on the Chandalar River Fire #349. A member of a saw module was working about 50 feet into the black. The sawyer was heads-down bucking a log when a fire-weakened tree fell and struck him on the head. The tree had come from his eleven-o'clock position. After initially striking him on the front of the hard hat, the tree continued downward across his left neck and shoulder area. The sawyer took a knee and was momentarily disoriented and required assistance.

The sawyer immediately exhibited signs of light sensitivity, headache, neck pain, and balance issues. The line medic determined the situation called for a precautionary "Green" transport to definitive care for follow-up examination. The patient was ambulatory, alert, conscious x4 (oriented to person, place, time, and situation). Vitals were normal.

The sawyer walked with the line medic to a nearby helispot. From there he was flown via agency helicopter to Fort Yukon, then moved via a private fixed-wing aircraft (Guardian Medical) to Fairbanks Municipal Airport. An ambulance then transported the patient to the Fairbanks hospital. Representatives from the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center (AICC) were there to assist.

Following an X-ray, MRI, and exam, the attending physician found no soft tissue damage. However, the physician diagnosed the patient with a concussion. This resulted in a "No Duty" determination and direction to follow-up with the sawyer's home physician for future work clearance.

Lesson from the Person Hit by Tree

Don't Only Focus on the Big Trees

✓ The individual struck by the tree remarked that he had been most focused on the bigger trees. He was doing this out of habit. The tree that hit him was approximately 20' tall and 4" dbh. He said that in the future, he will consider all sizes of trees as potential hazards.

***He had been focused on the bigger trees out of habit.
All sizes of trees are potential hazards.***

Lessons Related to Both Incidents

Tactical Waiting

- ✓ Crew overhead discussed the common dilemma of waiting. They fully understand the need to wait for the right conditions. There is only so much preparation and improving that can be done. The mission at that point involves just waiting. However, most of us don't enjoy "sitting around." It feels awkward.

Incident overhead also don't always appreciate seeing crews "sitting around." This can lead to busy work—such as mopping up farther in or "checking" fire edge. Doing work that doesn't need to be done is unnecessary exposure. We need to get better at "Tactical Waiting." But what does that look like? Is it just sitting around (and being OK with that) or is there another way to approach "Tactical Waiting"?

Crying Wolf?

- ✓ Crewmembers from the first incident expressed frustration about how often the tactics seemed to change. These firefighters are well versed in the concepts of Task, Purpose, and End-state. The crewmembers felt it was important to understand the mission and what purpose their actions served. They felt confused when assignments seemed to yo-yo between opposing strategies. There were times they were "going direct" and 30 minutes later burning out areas that negated their previous work. They felt like —"hey, you sold us on this first tactic and we bought in, then the next moment we are doing the opposite!" Some of this is understandable based on opportunities that arise as conditions change – but too much of it can erode trust and morale. This is related to the "Tactical Waiting" lesson and the danger of busy work.

Inherent Risk

- ✓ This event highlights the "Inherent Risk" we often speak of. In both instances (on both days), the risk was identified, discussed, and accepted. On this day, the risk of being hit by a tree came to fruition. This is part of accepting risk. The lesson going forward is a routine one: Make sure the task is necessary and serves the incident objectives—because you cannot ELIMINATE risk.

This RLS was submitted by Safety Officers Travis Dotson and Bob Habeck

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