

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Chainsaw Cut

Date: July 19, 2025

Location: South Rim Fire, Colorado

“A split second can affect the next 60 years of your life.”

Injured sawyer

A crew was removing trees adjacent to a completed dozer line that was intended to be used for a burnout within the coming days. While limbing a 10-inch diameter juniper, a sawyer pinched the bottom of the chainsaw bar in a 3-inch limb when the cut was approximately 90 percent completed. The limb was visually covered by dead limbs of the same juniper.

The sawyer, who was not directly working with a swamper, reached forward to move the limb to free the bar from the tree while maintaining his right hand on the trigger handle. As he reached forward, he inadvertently activated the throttle. The sawyer's left hand contacted the top of the chain while it was running at cutting speed, causing severe injury to the sawyer's hand.

The sawyer immediately set the chainsaw down on the ground at the base of the tree and notified the closest member of his crew of the accident. The medical response began with crew members rushing to the sawyer while the crew boss trainee assumed command for the incident within an incident. They



Figure 1: Juniper tree that was being limbed. Sawyer was standing to the left of the tree, indicated by the arrow.

provided basic first aid and applied an adjustable field tourniquet. A field EMT and ambulance were on scene within 5 minutes and began to prepare the sawyer for transport to the local regional hospital. Medical personnel assessed and further treated the injured sawyer then loaded him into the ambulance. The ambulance arrived at the hospital within 1 hour and 15 minutes of the accident where the sawyer was taken into surgery to have one finger reconstructed and two fingers amputated at the top knuckle, just below the fingernail.



Figure 2: Sawyer's left glove showing damage from chainsaw.

Lessons

Perception versus the reality of a compressed timeline

Even though fire activity did not dictate the need to hurry, the sawyer and crew perceived a compressed timeline to complete the preparation of this indirect line because it was vital to the potential burnout operation. Take time to voice concerns and evaluate the urgency of assigned tasks.

The sawyer noted that it would have been better to work with a swamper and lock the chain break before clearing the debris from the bar.

Fuel injected chainsaws

The chainsaw involved is a newer fuel injected model which has more horsepower and less lag time than a carbureted model. Fuel injected chainsaws react more effectively to throttle inputs than non-fuel injected models. This may have contributed to the severity of this injury. More research is needed to understand the impact of these saws on injury severity.

Tactical line medics

The incident management team makes a point to tactically place Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel close to where crews are working. The division supervisor and medical unit leader directed EMS to diligently tour the division and located them in areas where rapid response was possible. Line medics, the division assigned ambulance, and the incident-identified medical helicopter and crew were scanning both tactical and command frequencies. The line medics and division ambulance began their response as soon as the yellow medical was announced over the tactical radio frequency. Additionally, the helicopter and crew started preparations to respond when the yellow medical was first announced on the command channel but were never deployed because ground transport was determined to be the most effective. Because of this, medical personnel were able to be on site very quickly, providing immediate first aid and shortening the time to definitive care.

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