

Event Type: Hit By Tree
Date of Incident: August 10, 2024
Location: Coffee Can Saddle Fire
Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest

Implementing Lessons and Best Practices

Coffee Can Saddle Hit by Tree Event Summary

On August 10, 2024, during initial attack on the Coffee Can Saddle Fire on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest in Idaho, eight firefighters were engaging the fire when the Incident Commander (IC) was struck by a tree. The IC sustained multiple injuries, including skull fractures, fractured ribs, and a collapsed lung.

Initial medical care was provided on scene. Firefighters transported the injured firefighter via a Type 6 engine to a ground ambulance. They worked there with advanced medical personnel to stabilize the patient for transport via air ambulance to St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Lewiston, Idaho.

High Profile Lessons

“The module, having recently reviewed the Dutch Creek Protocols during a Six Minutes for Safety briefing, knew that minimizing the time to higher care was critical. With an airway established, they turned their focus on figuring out a way to get ENG-1 (the IC) off the hill—without a backboard or SKED/KED. SMJ-2 remembered a training scenario from his previous job in which they constructed an improvised litter using two small trees, chainsaw chaps, and fiber tape. After a quick description, part of the group started assembling a makeshift litter. At 2205, ENG-1 (the IC) was rolled onto the litter and the firefighters began to carry him down to the engine.”

From the Coffee Can Saddle Learning Review Narrative



This is the actual improvised litter—constructed with 3 pairs of chaps, fiber tape, and small trees—that was used to get the hit-by-tree injured IC off the hill on the Coffee Can Saddle Fire.

The well-established practice of integrating Six Minutes for Safety (6MFS) into daily briefings—which, in this case, referenced a learning product from the LLC, demonstrates the value of both the practice of 6MFS briefings and

the repository of learning products curated by the LLC.

The heartbreaking lessons learned on the Dutch Creek incident, which was nearly 16 years ago and in a different part of the country, influenced the actions of the firefighters on the Coffee Can Saddle incident—and may have saved a life.

The SMKJ-2's experience improvising a litter in a training environment, where time and consequence pressures are dialed back, allowed the space for learning. The mental "slides" created during training was foundational to this group being able to rapidly improvise a litter in this time-compressed, consequential environment.

SMKJ-2 rapidly accessed and communicated a "slide." This was vital to the success of getting ENG-1 off the hill.

"Adapt and overcome" is a well-known mantra within our workforce. The actions taken on this incident illustrate how this attitude plays out in practice. Our operating environment demands this perspective given the vast amount of uncertainty we deal with. There is no doubt the "adapt and overcome" response to emergent situations will continue.

Another well-worn mantra is "be prepared". We train for the skills we know are needed to carry out the mission. We make sure the tools and equipment necessary to do the work are on hand and in working order. Through this lens we can ask why it is our workforce is making a stretcher out of sticks and tape when there is a purpose-built tool available? A "soft stretcher" has been showing up in wildland fire incident reports since 2013. An issue of [Data Points in 2023](#) highlighted five events reiterating the use of this tool as a best practice. There have been two additional events since it was published.

A soft stretcher, also known as a carry-all, is a lightweight, flexible stretcher with nylon carry handles. A soft stretcher is stored folded up (like a space blanket) and is easily kept in a vehicle and/or carried in a pack on the fireline.

Recommended Action: Carry a purpose-built soft stretcher on the fireline.

While it is a valuable skill to be able to build a backcountry litter out of materials on hand, having one manufactured for this specific purpose saves precious time during emergency situations and reduces exposure by eliminating the process of building anything "makeshift" and ensuring the load capacity to support injured personnel. Soft stretchers are available from multiple vendors.



Excerpt from "Data Points"

This event can serve as a reminder that the path to improvement will always involve continuing to adapt and overcome – both in the moment and over time. Improvement involves adopting best practices and updating tools and equipment. But who's responsibility is it to make sure the workforce is adequately equipped? In this instance, there are clearly early adopters out there purchasing soft stretchers for their crews to use in crucial moments. Most of the workforce is not equipped with the latest equipment, even when it is as simple and easily acquired as a soft stretcher.

This raises the question of how an organization as a whole learns and adopts best practices. The "organization" might consist of a crew, a district, a state office, a company, a region, or an entire interagency program.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ *Do you or your staff have a soft stretcher? Why or why not?*
- ❖ *How does your unit promote learning at the organizational level?*
- ❖ *How is your training related to lessons from other events?*
- ❖ *Have you learned something from the LLC, 6MFS, or another source, that led to a better outcome in the field?*

This RLS was submitted by:

**Matt Carroll
Program Specialist
Office of Innovation &
Organizational Learning
USDA Forest Service**

**Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?
Click this button:**

**[Share
Your Lessons](#)**