

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Falling Incident During Field Certification

Date: July 14, 2025

Location: Hoquiam, Washington

The Lessons from this Barber Chair Falling Incident During Field Certification

By

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On July 14, 2025, I was certifying a group of firefighters as beginner fallers (FAL3). This was an area which was used for this purpose for several years due to the abundance of trees within the complexity level for beginner fallers.

We conducted a tailgate safety briefing discussing general hazards of falling as well as the site-specific hazards.

The firefighter successfully completed falling his first tree. When performing a back cut in the second tree, it barber-chaired, falling against the lean and toward the firefighter, cutting off access to both escape routes.

When the escape routes were cut off, the faller chose to escape downslope and perpendicular to the direction which he observed the tree falling, opposite his preferred escape route. I was upslope about 100 feet and moved behind a stand of fir. The rest of his crew was located farther upslope about two tree lengths.

Contributing Factors

Weather – Winds were light with northerly gusts of about 10 mph, with clear skies and moderate temperatures. The wind was a contributing factor considering that the canopy had gaps from previously felled trees.

Experience – The firefighter had several seasons of experience with a chainsaw but had limited experience with the tree species being cut. We covered a detailed safety response plan prior to falling trees and discussed a cutting plan that was adequate for the tree species and falling complexity.

Technique – The firefighter was more comfortable using a Humboldt cut, but our agency uses the conventional cut for evaluating firefighters for falling. (A Humboldt cut is the tree-felling technique in which the notch [undercut] is made with a horizontal top cut and an angled bottom cut, with the notch removed from the stump rather than the log.)

We discussed the differences and I believed his skill and experience would continue to serve him well in the evaluation. The firefighter estimated the direction of tree lean differently than I, the evaluator—but, after discussion, trusted my estimation.



Top – The barber-chaired stump showing the overshoot holding wood in the back cut.

Bottom – The 8-10 foot portion of the tree that split off the trunk as the tree fell back.

Lessons

I had a brief discussion with the firefighter regarding the differences between the conventional and Humboldt cut prior to beginning his evaluations. I think it would have been a better choice to have a longer discussion about the differences and challenges before attempting to evaluate this firefighter.

When in a similar situation, I would strongly recommend asking directly about any discomfort regarding falling practices and evaluation expectations. It is normal for both the evaluator and the trainee to feel uncomfortable. Take this as an opportunity to express this discomfort and possibly reevaluate the cutting plan.

I would also suggest a reliance on communication. I did not have much work history with this firefighter but trusted his capabilities based on my direct observations. I neglected to recognize that trust was built on an abundance of communication, which I should have continued throughout this evaluation.

This firefighter recognized immediately when the tree began to fall against the lean and attempted to utilize his escape routes. He was also able to recognize that his escape routes were compromised in time to get clear of the stump and to safety.

One of the outcomes from this event is more specific discussion about the faller deciding whether to attempt falling a tree, especially when evaluating for this certification. We will be using an emphatic go/no-go statement from the faller prior to starting the saw and attempting to fall the tree.

One of the outcomes of this event was recognition of the benefits of a clear, concise, and rehearsed incident response plan. After the tree had landed on the ground, the crew members immediately reestablished accountability and confirmed no member was injured.

This RLS was submitted by:

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