

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Chainsaw Cut to Swamper

Date: June 19, 2026

Location: Sawmill Fire, near Cedar City, Utah

The Story and Lessons from this Swamper Chainsaw Cut Incident

Narrative Summary

The morning of June 19, 2026, a U.S. Forest Service Wildland Fire Module was transitioning from two long night shifts into a day shift assignment on the Sawmill Fire, a wind-driven incident burning through dense pinyon-juniper country approximately 45 miles northwest of Cedar City, Utah.

The Sawmill Fire burned hot and fast during the first three operational periods. By the morning of June 19, fire behavior had slightly moderated, providing the crew a window to secure the edge of Division Alpha before conditions were expected to deteriorate later in the day due to higher winds.



Fire activity on the Sawmill Fire on June 17.

The Incident Medical Plan included communicating all “Green” medical incidents straight to the IC and all “Yellow” or “Red” medical incidents communicated directly to Color Country Dispatch over the local repeater using the Medical Incident Report (MIR).

By 0800, the module was on the fireline, securing the edge and cleaning up ladder fuels to keep the fire out of the canopy. A saw team from the module—one sawyer and two swampers—moved steadily from tree to tree, limbing junipers while carefully managing each branch to keep it from dropping into the hot duff and subsequently dragging heat out into the “green” side of the fireline.

During one of these operations, the sawyer was cutting through a juniper limb, planning to continue directly into the next one. The swamper stood opposite, holding both limbs—one in each hand—to control their fall. As the saw finished the first cut and transitioned toward the second, it struck the swamper’s left thumb. The injury was immediate and severe.

The swamper later recalled thinking, “*Oh, that’s not good. The insides should not be on the outside.*” The sawyer was also carrying the 10-person medical kit. They immediately removed it from their pack and started to get the

appropriate medical supplies. A squad leader was quickly on scene; they wrapped the laceration and then initiated a **Yellow Priority Medical Incident** with Color Country Dispatch using the Medical Incident Report. They began the short walk—75 to 100 yards—back to the vehicle. Within six minutes, they were en route to the hospital in Cedar City.

The injury required eleven stitches for temporary closure. Future surgery will be required to repair tendons that were also severed. The expected recovery period is from six to eight weeks.

Lessons

Lessons Learned from the Wildland Fire Module

From now on, during both formal and informal saw trainings, they will take a tiered approach with sawyer-swamper operations and working relationships. Early on, saw teams will maintain safe working distances where the swamper stays clear of the cutting area at all times. As saw team cohesion and communications develop, they have the capability to work in closer proximity to increase efficiency and production when conditions allow.

Does your module or crew teach sawyers and swampers how to safely operate while working together? If so, what does that look like?

When developing saw teams, they will focus on pairing up an inexperienced sawyer/swamper with an experienced sawyer/swamper when possible. On this incident, even though both sawyer and swamper had previous fire experience, they were new to the module this season and this was their first tank of gas cutting together. *The [PMS 212, NWCG Standards for Wildland Fire Chainsaw Operations](#)* references some of the responsibilities to consider for both the sawyer and swamper:



Sawyer Responsibilities

- Discuss the brushing, limbing, and bucking plans with the swamper.
- Maintain awareness of the location of and proximity to the swamper.
- Develop a process with the swamper to safely remove cut material.
- Cut material to facilitate safe and efficient removal.
- Maintain cutting area control.
- Develop a process to maintain situational awareness.

Swamper Responsibilities

- Discuss the brushing, limbing, and bucking plans with the sawyer.
- Ensure the sawyer is aware of your presence when working within reach.
- Only approach when the sawyer indicates it is safe to do so.
- Never push or pull on material while the sawyer is cutting it.
- Help identify hazards and maintain situational awareness.
- Ensure other crew members do not approach the sawyer directly; they should approach the swamper, who will then alert the sawyer.

Whose responsibility is it to ensure cutting area control when brushing and cutting fireline? Sawyers? Swampers? Or both?

What key points should be included in “effective communication” between a sawyer and swamper?

In the future, this Wildland Fire Module will focus on ensuring that the pace and tempo of saw teams’ operations is dictated by the skill and experience level of the saw team.

What are some factors that should be considered when dictating the tempo/pace of a saw team?

Is it possible to have zero injuries if sawyers and swampers are consistently working together in a close cutting area?

Three Previous Injury to Swamper Incidents

According to the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center and the U.S. Forest Service Accident and Near Miss Reporting Form, there have been 18 reported swamper-related injuries as a result of being cut by the chainsaw over the last five years. Three prior Rapid Lesson Sharing reviews that involved injuries to a swamper during chainsaw operations:

Idaho Project Work Chainsaw Cut 2025

On July 22, 2025, the Vegas Valley Hand Crew was conducting project work clearing brush with chainsaws along trails on the McCall Ranger District on the Payette National Forest. The crew had been working approximately two hours down the 315 Trail. While assisting in demonstrating a cutting technique, a swamper was struck on the leg by a chainsaw experiencing a kickback. The individual suffered a 1/2-inch deep, 3-inch wide cut to the lower leg. Crew medical personnel responded immediately and applied bandages to control the bleeding. The individual was carried to a helispot, where he was transferred to a helicopter and transported to the hospital in McCall, Idaho. He was treated and released on light duty.



Pagosa RD Chainsaw Cut RLS

During prep on a prescribed fire, a firefighter working as a swamper came in contact with the chainsaw and sustained a 5-inch long cut on the upper arm. Another U.S. Forest Service firefighter, who also happened to be a registered nurse, got the bleeding stopped and assisted in transporting the firefighter to a waiting ambulance. The firefighter was then taken to a hospital, received 21 staples, and was released to light duty. A full recovery is anticipated.



Hendrix Fire Chainsaw Cut RLS

The terrain was steep and rocky and the saw teams reported “rocking” their chain several times throughout the course of the day. This made handling the saw more difficult and required more time and effort to complete each cut. The swamper picked up his pace and was working to manipulate the log as the sawyer reentered the kerf to finish the release cut on the bottom of the log. Because the log was partially buried, the swamper lifted and rolled the log back toward himself by pulling back on a branch. It was at this moment that an awkward angle of the saw bar coming out of the kerf resulted in a violent and unanticipated kickback of the chainsaw. Simultaneously to this kickback occurrence, the swamper reached over the kerf where the saw struck the swamper on his left forearm. The squad leader, now standing just 10 feet away, watched this incident as it happened: “I noticed a red mist and saw blood splatter on the front of the swamper's yellow. I knew exactly what had just taken place.”



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