

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Firefighter Struck by Tree

Date: September 2, 2014

Location: 790 Fire, Oregon



“When he said he was OK, we believed him.”

Crew Boss

On September 2, 2014, a Sawyer on an Oregon Type 2 IA crew was injured by a tree that had been fallen by another crewmember. This close call resulted in a minor injury and a trip to the local medical facility. This incident-within-an-incident also brought up issues, insights—and lessons—regarding contract crews.

NARRATIVE

This Oregon-based contract crew had been assigned to a division whose main objective was to prepare a road that could be used as a contingency line. With the fire being under a full-suppression strategy and positioned entirely within a wilderness area, this work was being implemented as a precaution if the fire should move outside the wilderness.

September 2 was day six of the crew’s current assignment. Their objective was to continue prep work with the same approach they had been using the previous days. The saws would take small sections, opening canopy spacing and removing ladder fuels, then “leap frog” the next saw when they tied-in to their section. At times, some saws would be in close proximity to one another and swampers would be in the mix. Once material was cut, the swampers would “chain” the cut material to a chipper or pile it for chipping later.

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Felled Tree Brushes Nearby Sawyer—Who Had Appeared to be a Safe Distance Away

As one sawyer (SAW1) approached a 40-50-foot green fir tree that was approximately four inches in diameter at the base, he noticed that there were a few other workers nearby. SAW1 looked around to ensure that the area was safe and then made the cut to drop the tree.

Once the tree was cut, it didn’t move. It was limb-locked to surrounding trees. SAW1 made visual contact with the other sawyer (SAW2) who appeared to be at a safe distance and received positive acknowledgement by them that they knew it was coming down toward them. After receiving this confirmation, SAW1 went to give the tree a little encouragement by pushing on it with his hands. As soon as he touched it, the tree went over.

When the tree went all the way to the ground, he noticed the tree brush SAW2. While his hardhat came off, he was not knocked to the ground. SAW1 asked SAW2 if he was OK and if he needed any assistance. SAW2 stated that he was OK—but needed a moment to gather his wits.

Crew Boss Calls for EMTs

Upon hearing what happened, the Crew Boss (CRWB) called for the crew EMTs to come assess SAW2 and bring him to the CRWB's location. Initial assessment showed no signs of injury except some slight tenderness on his head from where the tree brushed his hardhat. SAW2 stated he was fine and wanted to go back to work. The CRWB—convinced that SAW2 was well enough to go back to work—instructed him to work in a “light duty” capacity for a while swamping the cut material.

Crew EMTs—Considering Recent Concussion Training—Decide to Monitor Injured Firefighter

The crew EMTs, having some background with head injuries and some recent concussion training, made a decision to sit SAW2 down so they could monitor him for a while. As time progressed, SAW2 started to display signs that his condition was deteriorating. These symptoms included: nausea, a contusion was beginning show, some dizziness, and slight head pain behind the eyes.

It was close to the end of their shift. The crew loaded SAW2 into their vehicles and transported him to basecamp.

Because Injured Firefighter is on a Contract Crew— Using an Ambulance for Transport Could Be Complicated

Once in camp, the crew's EMTs took SAW2 to the Medical Unit for further assessment. The paramedic did an assessment and recommended that SAW2 be transported to the nearest medical facility for more evaluation. Because the firefighter is employed by a contractor, the Medical Unit knew that transport by an ambulance was a bit more complicated—due to payment for this service by the contractor. Therefore, the paramedic did not automatically place SAW2 in an ambulance for transport.

Because the injury was not life threatening, discussions with the contractor and Medical Unit concluded that the injured firefighter could be transported to the hospital by a contractor-owned vehicle. Had this company transport not been immediately available, the ambulance would have been the obvious choice.

The medical facility diagnosed SAW2 with a slight concussion and recommended that he take two days off to rest. The company—errring on the side of safety—decided to have the individual take one week off before rejoining the crew.

That evening, the crew conducted an AAR to process the day's events—focusing on their safe practices and finding ways to improve to minimize future risk.

LESSONS

- ❖ Always maintain visual contact with fellow sawyers and crew when working in close proximity.
- ❖ Maintain good communication when felling any size tree, including: Visual cues showing direction of falling tree and waiting for clear confirmation of acknowledgement before proceeding with cut.
- ❖ If necessary, clear area of all personnel until cutting is complete. Wait until sawyer gives a “thumbs up” before allowing others to come into felling area.
- ❖ Felling small trees presents the same hazards as large trees. Don't be fooled by lack of size.
- ❖ Do not be too focused on just production. Slow down to ensure safe practices are in place and being utilized.
- ❖ When there is any uncertainty about whether to transport a patient or not, always err on the side of caution and transport. Don't wait for obvious signs that you should—doing so may end up being too late.
- ❖ Immediately inform supervisor and line medics of injury regardless of its severity. Doing so helps to open the discussion and helps with the decision-making process.
- ❖ The value of having trained EMTs on the crew for immediate assessment.
- ❖ Seek additional medical support from outside the crew setting. There may be someone with more advanced skills that could provide assistance and an outside perspective.

Input From the IMT:
Contract and Agency Resources on Incidents

Discussion topics that emerged from this minor incident included the cultural and organizational aspects concerning contract and agency resources on incidents. Specifically, certain practices and thought processes contractors use during emergency events or incidents with an incident.

Without trying to make assumptions and trying to gain some understanding of individual's thought processes, these were some of the questions that were being asked by the IMT after this event:

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| ❖ Why did it take so long for the Crew Boss to report the injury? | some form of retaliation from the IMT (such as sending crew home)? |
| ❖ Was it the crew's perception that if they reported the incident they would be facing | ❖ Is there an understanding among contracted resources of policies and procedures regarding injury occurrences? |

After the event, the IMT was concerned that some contractors, organizationally, may not have had the knowledge or training on how to approach certain incidents with the same expectations to which all agency resources are held. These expectations should be that all agency and contract resources take the same approach in reporting incidents-within-an-incident according to the IMT medical plan.

Is there a need for IMTs to *better* educate and inform contract resources on expectations, standards, and procedures? And, if so, how do we approach this?

Knowing these expectations and following through with them should override any concerns of retaliation toward the crew. There needs to be trust that the IMT will determine the best course of action after all considerations have been weighed.

The IMT greatly appreciates the crew and their willingness to be open and forthcoming with information regarding this event—including their willingness to engage and participate in the Rapid Lessons Sharing process and showing their support to the Lessons Learned concept.

Input From the Contract Crew:
Their Viewpoint and Approach to Their Work on All Incidents –
“Professionalism, Safety, Production”

It is never intentional, and definitely not a course of action, to withhold any information or notification of an injury—of any kind—on an incident when believing that it may result in a negative action toward the crew, company, or individual.

Something the crew has struggled with and has identified as a cultural issue among the firefighting community is the need to constantly having to “prove” themselves because they are “just contractors” and not initially viewed as competent. Even with the knowledge of knowing this, the crew continues to use their mantra (above) as motivation.

Some items that the crew believes need to be addressed and acknowledged, with the understanding that while these items pertain to them specifically, they might also apply to most others in their contract community:

- ❖ Regardless of knowing that they are being evaluated under the “Best Value Contract”, they don’t allow this to dictate their actions. They stress that: “We don’t need a piece of paper to tell us we are a good crew.”

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- ❖ The crew appreciates the work and is happy to be where they are and doing what they are doing, including pleasing the user and working hard toward the end product. Keeping all this in mind, the crew and company makes efforts to ensure that they know what is expected of them from management and strive to adhere to procedures and policies.
 - ❖ The crew understands the differences in treatment when it comes to certain policies and the business aspect of their job. Some are still a little unclear and could use some cleaning up. For instance, some teams will reissue medical supplies and some won't; same in the supply unit. Not trying to change policies, just more clarification.
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“We all could go to other places for jobs. But we come back to this crew for a reason—we are a family.”

Crewmember EMT

Submitted By: David Bihr
With support from the Pacific Northwest
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