

Holyoak Accident
6/12/2001

On June 12, 2001 four individuals were working on a spruce beetle suppression project in the North Creek drainage of the Abajo Mountains, Monticello Ranger District, Manti-La Sal National Forest. They were re-burning Engelmann spruce trap trees that were infested with spruce bark beetles. The trap trees were burned during late fall 2000, but due to snow and limited fuels didn't burn hot enough to kill all the beetles. Additional limbs and between 5-15 gallons of mixed fire-trol gel were being applied per tree to get a hot enough fire to kill the spruce beetles under the bark. The elevation was about 10,000 feet. This trap tree was located in patches of snow, so there was little danger of loss of control. The primary concern was associated with the risk of the fire escaping later in the season if allowed to burn into adjacent fuel concentrations.

June 12th was a windy day on the ridge tops, so the crew moved to a flat basin protected from the wind. They proceeded to burn five trap trees at this location, and everything was progressing well.

They had just finished burning two trees and were waiting for them to cool down. The crew had two back pack pumps of water they began using to keep the fire from spreading to a large pocket of downfall that was nearby. Mike picked up one of the pumps and hiked about 30 feet above one of the burned trees and proceeded to wet down a small spot. There was a dead spruce snag about 13" diameter and about 45 feet high standing next to the burned trap tree. The fire had spread to the base of this snag. It was leaning uphill. There was still some smoke drifting uphill that may have made it hard for Mike to see the snag falling. The supervisor heard a crack and turned to see the snag falling uphill. He was not aware that Mike was standing above the tree, but heard the other crew members yell. Mike began to turn and was struck across the head by the snag. It dislodged his hardhat, slid across his right arm, and knocked him to the ground.

When they reached Mike he was unconscious, but breathing. He awoke in about 30 seconds and complained of pain in his neck and right arm. He was disoriented. The supervisor immediately called for medical help through the Moab Interagency Fire Center. The Monticello ambulance was dispatched. While waiting, the crew had Mike remain still until the ambulance arrived, 30 minutes later. A neck brace was fitted on him and he was placed on a backboard and strapped down. He was then carried about 1/5 of a mile downhill to the road and loaded into the ambulance. He was transported to the hospital in Monticello, Utah (total time from the accident to the hospital was about 3 hours) and later flown to the San Juan Regional Medical Center in Farmington, New Mexico.

It was determined that Mike had a broken neck (a vertical break of one vertebrae), but there was no evident spinal nerve damage. The hardhat had saved his life. He was released from the hospital and sent home two days later. He will be wearing a neck brace for 6-12 weeks. He is still experiencing pain, but was fortunate to have no damage to the spinal cord. His neck was still in alignment following the accident and no surgery was needed.

Mike said he had noticed the snag but thought it wouldn't fall, and if it did would slide down the burned tree, away from where he was standing. Most of the spruce snags in this area have been solid, but this one was rotten in the center with only a shell of about 1.5 inches holding it up. There was no way to tell this snag was rotten until it fell over. There were some wind gusts in the area at higher elevation, but wind was not a factor in the fall of the snag. Mike is a very safety conscious person but was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.



The tree was about 13" DBH and 45' in height..



*The tree struck Mike at this point. Diameter is 6" to 7"
There was approximately 15' of the tree extending
beyond the point that he was standing when it fell.*