



LESSONS LEARNED

Northern Region Safety & Occupational Health
August 2013

“I am not Falling that Snag”

While on a small two acre fire, a wildland fire crew noticed that a 60 foot tall tree was burning. Upon closer inspection the crew verified that the fire was coming mostly from the top the tree, from a snag. The crew began water operations by cooling off the base of the tree, but they were unable to reach the rest of the tree by hose. They noticed that some limbs and debris were falling from the snag. One firefighter, who was a “C” Faller, attempted to fall the snag, but discontinued his efforts. He recognized that after performing his initial tree size-up and starting his “face” cut a large piece of debris fell from the tree. The Sawyer acknowledged that his abilities to egress the area while cutting the tree were unsafe and compromised. As he and the others started to reassess the snag, the Sawyer felt uncomfortable continuing saw operations on the tree. The Sawyer remarked, **“That snag is too much of a problem and I have plans to make it home tonight, so I am not falling that snag.”**

The Incident Commander, the Sawyer, and Swamper talked about what options they had as they withdrew from the area, along with the other firefighters. Due to the time of day (approximately 1300 hours) and that the snag was depositing fire embers on the ground, it was decided upon that the tree needed to be removed. Different options were discussed on how to remove the threatening tree such as: obtaining a replacement Sawyer, the usage of fireline explosives and bucket drops from a helicopter. The group decided first to utilize the helicopter bucket. The wait for the helicopter with bucket would be approximately 20 minutes. Right after the radio call for a bucket a large chunk of the snag fell from the tree, and prior to the arrival of the helicopter more debris from the snag fell to the ground. By the time the helicopter arrived to do bucket work bucket operations on the tree, only approximately ten feet of the snag remained. This allowed the firefighters to accomplish the mission safely and begin mop up operations. As one firefighter said **“just think what could have gone bad if we starting cutting that snag.”**

What Was Done Well?

- Recognizing the hazard (snag) and removing all firefighters from the area.
- Taking into account the advice and concerns of the Sawyer.
- The Sawyer having a good safe attitude and recognizing his limitations.
- Looking at other options to accomplish the mission, without compromising safety.
- Good crew communication, which allowed for openness for all involved to address their concerns.

Recommendations/Lessons Learned:

Every tree (snag) has hazards and unique problems. Each of us must keep this in mind and to respect others issues and concerns. Listen to those who may have additional training or experience. Walking away from this snag was the right thing to do. Talking out the issues and hazards showed good leadership and a safe felling operation.