

# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** Felling, Heavy Equipment

**Date:** April 2, 2019

**Location:** William B. Bankhead National Forest, Alabama;  
Southern Region

## “Oh, Snap . . .”

**The Dozer Operator looked back toward the Sawyer just in time to see that he had been launched vertically into the air.**

**The Sawyer would later recall: “I heard the snap. From the time I stepped away and set the saw down, to the time I caught air was a couple seconds. All that’s just a big blur. I can’t tell you how high I went or how it happened. The next thing I know I’m just like, oh my god, what happened?”**

### Background/Narrative

A tragic, fatal helicopter crash this March 27 on the Southern Region’s Sam Houston National Forest led to a “Stand Down” for the entire Region. This meant that prescribed fire would be put on hold, Region wide, for one week.<sup>1</sup>

For the William B. Bankhead National Forest, this was a critical time in the burn season. The crews were eager to meet acreage targets for the year. It was the optimal time to burn, but there was also other work to complete on the Forest.

The Kinlock Road, located on the Forest’s west side, is partially lined by beetle kill pine stands from an infestation in 2016. Members of the public often call to report that trees have fallen across the road. Crews are then dispatched to clear the trees. Because the crews were not allowed to burn on April 2, the Fire Management Officer prioritized snag removal. This activity was both an important project to complete and it was also a “good training opportunity.”



**Beetle kill pine stands from a 2016 infestation line Kinlock Road.**

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the fatal helicopter crash that caused the immediate Stand Down, pressure to reach acreage targets was intensified because of the work time that was lost due to the nationwide furlough that had occurred from December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019.

### The Crew Develops a Plan

At the morning snag removal project's "Tailgate Safety Meeting" the crew lead made a point to check in with the crew about how they were feeling and if they were all onboard with the assignment. They said: "Yes."

The crew developed a plan, which included safe spacing between the two Sawyers working toward each other from opposite ends of the project area.

A Type 3 Dozer would be utilized to clear the fallen trees off the road. Because the road was not officially closed, a traffic guard was in place.

Once they began felling operations, the Dozer Operator maneuvered back and forth, removing downed snags from the road. Supervisors arrived to the worksite to assist with operations. The Sawyers were "on a roll" that morning and successfully fell multiple snags.



Snag patches line both sides of Kinlock Road.



The 12-inch diameter Virginia pine snag.

After approximately two hours of felling, one of the Sawyers began cutting his tenth tree of the day.

This tree was a 12-inch diameter Virginia pine snag. It had no bark remaining and stood approximately 70-80 feet tall (see photo of the fallen snag on left).

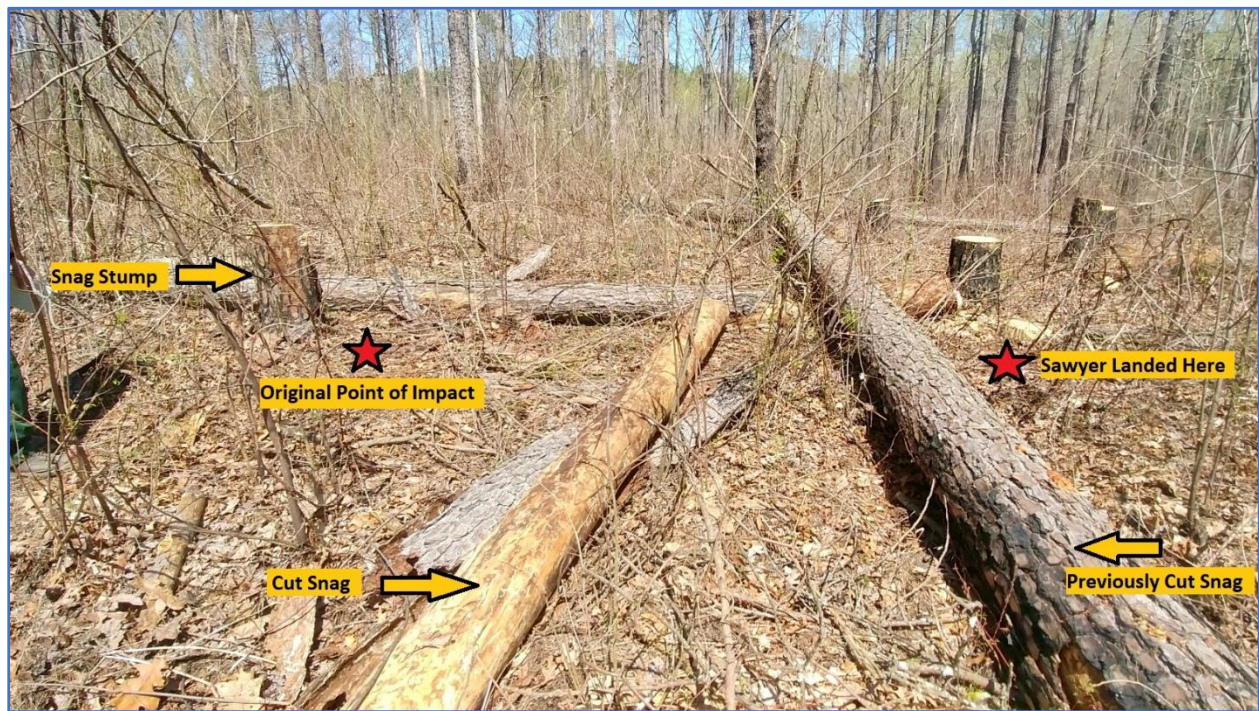
***As soon as the Dozer Operator's blade touched the snag, the holding wood snapped. The Dozer Operator watched as the tree fell toward his cab.***

### Sawyer Asks Dozer Operator to Push Against Tree to Free His Saw

The Sawyer became frustrated when his bar was pinched during his back cut. Unable to free his saw, he decided to call the Dozer Operator to use the dozer to push against the tree, with just enough force to release the saw. When the dozer arrived, the Sawyer made his request. He intended to grab the saw when it was released, then use his predetermined escape route to get away from the falling tree.

As soon as the Dozer Operator's blade touched the snag, the holding wood snapped. The Dozer Operator watched as the tree fell toward his cab. He wanted the Sawyer to "get out of there" and clear the area of the falling snag.

The Sawyer freed the saw, set it down, and as he turned away from the falling snag—attempting to clear the area—he heard the snap of the holding wood.



The tree struck the dozer's cab and pivoted off the dozer blade. The Dozer Operator looked back toward the Sawyer just in time to see that he had been launched vertically into the air.

The Sawyer's boots were literally at the Dozer Operator's eye level. The Sawyer was catapulted by the butt of the snag and landed on a downed tree he had cut earlier.

The Dozer Operator turned off his equipment and ran to the Sawyer. The Operator recalls being completely shaken and thinking it was the worst thing he's ever seen. He hollered: "Hey Mike, you OK? What's hurtin' ya?! I'm gonna get you some help!"

Once he caught his breath, the Sawyer replied: "What happened?" The Sawyer would later recall: "I heard the snap. From the time I stepped away and set the saw down, to the time I caught air was a couple seconds. All that's just a big blur. I can't tell you how high I went or how it happened. The next thing I know I'm just like, oh my god, what happened? Man, what the hell just happened?! It hit my blind side. One minute I'm givin' thumbs up, and the next minute I'm lying on a tree I had cut, completely out of breath."

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***They initiated the medical response by immediately contacting Alabama Dispatch. The Medical Care Provider began a thorough examination, while another employee filled out the 8-Line and relayed the information to Dispatch.***

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### **Their Medical Response**

The Dozer Operator called the Supervisor on his radio. He knew that this Supervisor was located on the other side of the project area, approximately one quarter mile away. The Dozer Operator reported that the Sawyer had been hit by a tree and needed medical help. The Supervisor got the attention of another Sawyer, who was the most medically qualified person on site, and requested he respond to the injured Sawyer.

Other employees heard the Dozer Operator's call to the Supervisor on the radio and also responded to this emergency. The Medical Care Provider immediately delegated responsibilities. They initiated the medical

response by immediately contacting Alabama Dispatch. The Medical Care Provider began a thorough examination, while another employee filled out the 8-Line and relayed the information to Dispatch.

The crew had taken medical equipment from the work center. They found peace of mind knowing that this equipment was available, should they need it.

The Medical Care Provider was able to complete a detailed assessment of the Sawyer and was relieved that he didn't appear to be in critical condition or have life-threatening injuries. The injured Sawyer reported pain in his chest, ribs, and his left foot. But, because this pain was tolerable, he was unsure if he needed any further medical attention.

The Supervisor insisted that the Sawyer go to the hospital for further evaluation. The Sawyer agreed. Next, the Medical Care Provider transported him in a government vehicle to the hospital, 30 minutes away.

After the Sawyer left for the hospital, the Supervisor asked the remaining crew: *"Y'all good to keep working, or you wanna call it for the day?"* They all chose to continue working. The injured Sawyer was evaluated at the hospital and released that evening with bruised ribs and a sprained ankle.

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## **Practices Worth Sharing and Lessons Learned**

### ***Simulation Training is Crucial for Medical Incident Response Efficiency Thoroughness Trade Off — Simulation Helps to Mitigate***

#### **1. Use of Wedges**

This event revealed the need to remind each other about the importance of staying at least 2½ tree lengths away from snags being pushed by heavy equipment and to make sure that Sawyers practice wedge and other cutting techniques. However, there are also many other techniques that are worth discussing in refreshers and simulations.

#### **2. Communication**

One of the Sawyers attributed the ultimate success of this medical incident to clear communication on scene. The Supervisor, reminded of the importance of declaring positions during a medical incident, later stated: *"Don't just assume your role in an incident-within-an-incident, declare it."*

It does not require Incident Commander qualifications to serve as the IC in an emergent incident response (incident-within-an-incident, medical, hazmat, etc.).

#### **3. Taking Care of Each Other**

During simulations, we often focus on the event itself. We don't always practice strategies for checking in on the personnel who were involved, but who were not physically injured. The ones who are injured are not always the ones who experience the most trauma. These can be tough conversations. Having a plan for when and how to do this is something to practice.

#### **4. Medical**

Due to clear communication between the people in the field and in Alabama Dispatch, the 8-Line was completed and within 14 minutes from the time of injury, the injured Sawyer was en route to the hospital. Because the crew had participated in a planned "Unplanned Medical Event" training earlier in the season, they were better prepared to handle this situation.

## Other Considerations

- ✓ Have you ever taken the time to watch an experienced Type 1 or C Sawyer complete a very technical fall? If you are a new Sawyer, have you ever asked a more experienced Sawyer to evaluate your technique?
- ✓ As a new Sawyer, have you trained with an experienced Sawyer on cutting techniques for both live and dead trees?
- ✓ Conversely, if you're an experienced Sawyer, have you taken the time to coach new fallers in complex or challenging situations?
- ✓ What would you do if you pinched your bar on a back cut? How do you safely get the bar out and the tree on the ground?
- ✓ Are you comfortable using gunning sights with your saw? Do you trust them?
- ✓ Are you familiar with tree species' characteristics and the falling tendencies of various tree types?
- ✓ Regardless of your level of chainsaw experience, how do you balance the pressures to "produce" (cut lots of trees!) with the need to train, refresh yourself, as well as coach and instruct others?

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**This RLS was submitted by: Ground Safety Team – Sarrah Steele and Kurt Kause.**

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