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SAFETY ALERT

15-S-12

UNSAFE TOPPING AND BUCKING OF A TREE UNDER TENSION

November 2015

BACKGROUND: On a calm, clear, late spring morning in the Appalachians, a logger was cutting the top of a felled oak tree. He was working in gently rolling terrain in an open stand of mature hardwoods.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS: The 40-year-old logging business owner/timber cutter had approximately 20 years of logging experience. He was considered fully trained for the job and had no previous logging injury history. He was wearing a hardhat and ear plugs.

UNSAFE ACTS AND CONDITIONS: The logger stood in a four-foot space between two felled trees while cutting the top off of the felled tree that was uphill from him. The top of this tree was held in tension by an uphill standing tree.

Prior to this incident, the logger had taken a personal cell phone call that had upset him. He later realized that when he restarted his chain saw, his mind was distracted from his task. As he topped the tree, he saw the log begin to move but nevertheless continued to cut while standing in this unsafe location.



INCIDENT: Before the logger could complete the cut, the felled tree broke, and the lower part of the tree sprung toward him, hit his lower left leg and pinned it against the other felled tree that was slightly downhill. The skidder operator came to his rescue and cut the lower tree so as to free the logger's pinned leg.

INJURY: The logger suffered a compound fracture of both bones in his lower left leg. He was hospitalized for 21 days, required three months of physical therapy, and lost three months of work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CORRECTION:

- Felled trees should be inspected for unrelieved tension prior to topping and delimbing. In this case, the logger could have asked the skidder operator to pull the tree away from the other tree and thereby release the tension before he began topping and bucking it. (The chain saw operator should use a top lock or limb lock to hold the tree until the skidder pulls it apart.)
- Topping and bucking of logs should be done from the uphill side of the tree, with workers positioning themselves such that no limb or branch or movement of the trunk will cause injury.
- All logging workers should be trained in proper hazard recognition for the task at hand and should wear the full complement of personal protective equipment when operating a chain saw. Periodically review and refresh chain saw operation safety policies and procedures with co-workers.
- Workers should not let personal issues distract from concentrating on work. Sometimes it is better to take time off from the job if emotional level or distress is significant. (*Note:* If cell phones are needed for communication among crew members, developing guidelines for non-business use while on the job may be appropriate.)

Reviewed by:
Southwide Safety Committee;
Rick Meyer
Appalachian/Southwide Region Manager

Please follow equipment manufacturers' recommendations for safe operation and maintenance procedures.