

Vehicle Tree Strike During Chainsaw Operator Evaluation

Incident Summary

Three U.S. Forest Service employees set out on the morning of May 8, 2024, to conduct a chainsaw operator evaluation at a popular campground on the District. Shortly after the first sawyer finished felling two trees during his evaluation, the second sawyer completed the back cut on his first tree of the day, inadvertently severing the hinge on the “offside”.

This resulted in the loss of control of a 25-inch DBH grand fir that was 80 feet in height, causing it to fall 45 degrees off the intended lay.

Instead of committing to the undercut and the lay communicated by the sawyer, heavy branch loading on one side of the canopy took over and redirected the tree after the hinge was severed, subsequently breaking a portion of the remaining hinge as it left the stump. This caused the fir to fall across the campground road and strike the parked fire vehicle that belonged to the evaluator administering the evaluations.

Damage was done to the utility boxes and to a chainsaw that was in the truck. Fortunately, no one suffered any physical injuries as a result of this event.



Just before the cuts were made to fall the tree,
the Crew Boss/Chainsaw Evaluator told the sawyer:
“Don’t hit my truck.”

Incident Narrative

It was proving to be another busy and particularly challenging spring this year for this Forest Service Ranger District in Washington state. These days, the pace of work never seems to slow down with the change in seasons. What’s more, numerous vacancies are also creating staffing shortages across the District that are exacerbated by the revolving door of detailers.

Key positions are unfilled, from the District Ranger and various staff officers on down the line to include the critical seasonal workforce.

It's become commonplace for District employees to now fill multiple roles as detailed positions are taken on—and the duties related to one's previous positions continue to pile up. Many District staff who find themselves in this predicament end up carrying the workload of both positions. This is the only way to keep the District functioning properly.

To make matters worse, tensions are building as individuals working multiple roles have taken on added responsibilities without the appropriate wage increases due to paperwork not being processed because of vacant supervisory positions.

Between onboarding personnel, hazard tree assessments, writing grants to fund their positions, maintaining, and operating an excavator, clearing trails, coordinating volunteers, and keeping up with a host of other required trainings and certifications, there may have been a few things, like chainsaw training and recertifications, that slipped through the cracks.

Communication Breakdown

During the melee of spring, it had come to the attention of Forest staff that two employees on this Ranger District had been operating chainsaws for several years without being reevaluated. This came as a surprise to management, especially considering the length of time that the two were operating outside agency saw policy.

It is apparent that communication at the Forest, District, and inner-District department level seems to have broken down. Everyone believes that they are communicating in various ways (some by email and others by post-it-note) and that the lack of information flow is due to someone else not doing their part.

Two long-term permanent seasonal employees, one of whom has worked on the District since 1979, mistakenly believed that the COVID-19 sawyer reevaluation waiver issued by the Forest Service in 2021—which extended sawyer certifications—was still in effect.

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On this heavily visited urban Forest, it was hard to find a quiet moment to stop or even slow down long enough to take a breath. The Recreation shop was feeling the pressure to get the hazard trees on the ground so that campgrounds could open for the big Memorial Day weekend.

In the past, the District's Recreation program had made several attempts to have their employees take C-level saw certification refreshers on the Forest. However, at the last minute on multiple occasions, Recreation program managers discovered that their employees would be bumped from the saw certification refresher participant list to allow "higher priority fire employees" to be evaluated for C-level certification. *[Note: The recollection regarding the history associated with these events is recalled differently—depending on which department is recounting the events.]*

An Uncomfortable Feeling

On the morning prior to this vehicle tree strike incident, the Crew Boss of a Type 2 Initial Attack (IA) Crew who was the "chainsaw evaluator" on the District, notified the two Recreation employees that they would need to attend a saw evaluation he was asked to conduct for them the following day.

With such short notice there would be little time to prepare. All planned work for both the Fire and Recreation departments had to be postponed to accomplish this. Therefore, there was a sense of frustration in the air that was palpable. Everyone wanted to get out there and get the saw evaluation process over with quickly.

“Fire as a culture can be a bit of a ‘black box’ and information is not always forthcoming regarding certification dates, pack tests, etc.”

Acting District Ranger

Doing so would “check the box” regarding management’s concern and would also allow the three of them to get back to the pressing work that had to be postponed. All of this helped set the stage for an uncomfortable feeling that would permeate the chainsaw evaluation session.

Bridging the Gap Between Fire and Recreation Programs

The far southern end of the Forest was a long distance away from the unit’s Saw Program Coordinator who was stationed on the northernmost District. Face-to-face contact between the Recreation and Fire shops was minimal, if it occurred at all. In fact, the Recreation shop was operating under saw program guidelines outlined by a prior District Ranger, who, at one point, made it clear that all saw program-related functions needed to be run through the Forest’s Fire shop.

This District Ranger had moved on several years ago. The direction under this Ranger’s tenure no longer reflected the District’s current direction. This left the saw program on this southern Ranger District outdated and disconnected from current saw program policy, training, and certification practices.

Although not pervasive on all Ranger Districts, there has long existed a rift between the wildland Fire and Recreation programs on this Forest. In this instance, the Type 2 Initial Attack (IA) Crew Boss and “chainsaw evaluator” expressed how he was working hard in an effort to bridge this gap between the Fire and Recreation programs. This rift in the agency as a whole is often deep, widely acknowledged, and lends itself to communication issues and conflicts.

As discussed in the “Conclusion” section on page 4, this condition appears to have been a contributing factor to this vehicle tree strike incident.

The District’s Type 2 Initial Attack (IA) Crew Boss and “chainsaw evaluator” had only been on the Forest the past three years—two of those years spent in his current role as the District chainsaw lead. Working to get his feet under him has been challenging. Strong personalities within the saw program on different Districts have caused frustrations, making it difficult to interface with individuals. This left the Crew Boss with minimal support as he did his best to navigate all the recent changes to the U.S. Forest Service National Saw Policy.

“These two sawyers have been on my radar for some time as they thought they were allowed to operate a chainsaw under the recertification waiver. I’ve attempted for two years to get them recertified. This year I finally got it done.”

Crew Boss/Chainsaw Evaluator

Situation: Not Ideal

On the day of the tree strike incident, in addition to the two sawyers, the Crew Boss was the only other participant on scene during the evaluation. This situation was not ideal. Other members of his crew, as well as Recreation staff members, were all heavily involved in onboarding new employees—still working through the latest round of hiring in a desperate attempt to fill vacant seasonal positions.

Individuals who would normally be relied upon to assist in saw evaluations were simply unavailable.

In an effort to get the evaluations completed as quickly as possible, the Crew Boss asked one sawyer to buck up a tree that he had felled across the trail while the second sawyer was working to fell the grand fir involved in the incident. This left the Crew Boss supervising two evaluations occurring simultaneously, while also serving as the only road guard for the campground.

The Crew Boss’s attention divided between both of these activities served to “shortchange” the evaluation process. This situation also presented a potential risk to the visiting public as vehicle traffic could not be appropriately

managed at the road closures. Fortunately, during the time of the tree strike incident, no other vehicles traveled through the “soft closure” that was in place.

Saw Trainings and Evaluations Drop to Low Priority

Each spring is accompanied by an often-crushing workload of managing the hazard tree program on a Ranger District. The work must be compressed into a very short window of time to enable developed recreation sites to be opened on schedule.

This work often starts just as soon as the snow melts and must be accomplished before all the developed recreation sites can be opened. The bulk of the workload falls to an understaffed and underfunded Recreation program that must first identify and document the hazard trees, obtain approvals to remove them, and then fell the hazard trees and clean up the sites to make access safe for the visiting public.

Keeping up with numerous mandatory training requirements associated with a wide variety of roles and certifications—each with its own specific criteria and recertification schedules—has become problematic and difficult for all employees to maintain.

In this situation, saw trainings and evaluations seemed to have fallen to the bottom of the high-priority list of tasks. Even with all the recent changes to the Forest Service saw program and the efforts made to communicate these changes, these two employees were missed—with their heads being down and focused on accomplishing their normal workload. Both individuals possessed a true Forest Service “get-it-done” mentality, with a strong commitment to serving the public good—sometimes resulting in an unforeseen outcome.

Conclusion

These stressors played a role in preventing the sawyer from speaking up when they felt the truck was too close, and influenced the evaluator’s decision not to act, even when they were aware of the risk associated with the vehicle’s location—but also decided not to move the truck.

The events leading up to this tree strike incident seem clear when viewed from the outside and cause someone to question exactly what they were thinking in that moment, parking a vehicle within striking distance of a tree being felled.

However, unfortunately, this is not the first time a vehicle has been struck by a tree during a chainsaw evaluation. In fact, this exact scenario has played out before, with the same shaking of heads and disbelief by individuals after hearing of such incidents.

For this to be the last vehicle tree strike during a saw evaluation incident, something must change. On-the-fly decision making while under the stress and tension accompanied by accomplishing work in our current environment is distracting and impairs decision making. Therefore, a greater focus on these human factors associated with these incidents should be prioritized.

Tension in the system in addition to tension between the Fire and Recreation shops, when not actively managed or resolved, will result in negative outcomes.

All three individuals involved in this incident shared how conducting the evaluation was uncomfortable from the start. It was a process these individuals wanted to get done quickly so that they could move on to the next list of priority tasks that needed to be accomplished.

These stressors played a role in preventing the sawyer from speaking up when they felt the truck was too close, and influenced the evaluator’s decision not to act, even when they were aware of the risk associated with the vehicle’s location—but also decided not to move the truck.

“Just because someone is a C faller (FAL1) doesn’t mean that accidents can’t happen.”

Crew Boss/Chainsaw Evaluator

“I failed a C certification in the past and I know how it feels.”

Recreation Supervisor

Managing Work Area Control

Tree felling operations involve inherent risks to both personnel and equipment. Managing work area control is a critical aspect of ensuring the safety of personnel and the equipment involved in the process. While the sawyer is the primary individual responsible to ensure work area control, this is a shared responsibility as diligence should be paid by all individuals involved with or working near saw operations.

If you see a potentially hazardous condition, say something immediately as others may be unaware. Never let rank or one’s status interfere with speaking up. Remember, when you’re the one running the saw, you’re in charge.

Lessons

- ❖ Whenever possible, maintain a safe work area distance of at least two times the tree height from a tree being felled, irrespective of the tree’s natural lean. Parking a vehicle on the “good side” of a tree, within striking distance, should never be part of your plan.
- ❖ In an effort to build a stronger saw program on the District, improve communication and foster better cohesion between the Fire and Recreation programs. The Fire and Recreation departments will now work together to ensure that trainings and evaluations are planned and scheduled for sawyers in a way that promotes cross-training opportunities.
- ❖ Saw operational proficiency can be lost, especially as work schedules and duties change, causing time lapses between opportunities to engage in saw operations. This presents a significant risk to sawyers’ safety and increases the likelihood of an accident. The Forest Service National Saw Policy states that it is the Forest Supervisor’s responsibility to provide cutting areas to meet Saw Program training requirements and to maintain sawyers’ proficiency.
- ❖ It is recommended that during a sawyer evaluation, individuals be given several opportunities to fell or buck trees before being evaluated in an official capacity.
- ❖ The importance of maintaining open lines of communication among teams at all organizational levels is essential for fostering positive working relationships and ensuring the success of collaborative efforts. Each of us have unique communication styles and preferences and utilize multiple communication methods when conveying important messages. Prioritize routine face-to-face interactions when discussing matters of significant importance. Direct interaction allows for clearer understanding, promotes active engagement, and helps build stronger connections among departments.
- ❖ Situations are not always as they appear at first glance. It is easy to come to a conclusion about the causal factors associated with an accident and who is “to blame” when the entirety of a given situation is unknown. Often, what may be perceived as recklessness or impaired judgement by individuals or a group stem from systemic-level issues that impede good decision-making.
- ❖ There is a tremendous amount of stress in the system caused by numerous factors. These factors include vacancies, rotating detailed positions, difficulties around hiring, and the heavy burden of collateral duties. These stressors are impacting the workforce. Employees are doing their best to overcome these obstacles with limited resources.

- ❖ More action is needed to address the systemic issues within the agency to mitigate significant problems and promote decision-making that empowers individuals—while also aligning with policy and standards.
- ❖ There is a significant benefit in cross-training between departments and organizations that will go a long way in rebuilding trust between departments. Consciously bringing individuals together for annual saw trainings, evaluations, refresher courses, or advanced workshops at the unit level is critical to creating well-informed and technically skillful saw operators.
- ❖ Leadership at all levels needs to intentionally create opportunities to maintain saw operational proficiency, foster team building, and ensure the time, and resources to do so. There is wide acknowledgement that saw operations are one of the high-risk tasks we regularly have employees and volunteers engage in. Yet investments in this program are often only made in response to a serious accident or injury.

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