INCIDENT FACTS

REPORT #:
71-243-2023

REPORT DATE:
July 24, 2023

INCIDENT DATE:
January 20, 2023

VICTIM:
51 years old

INDUSTRY:
Landscaping services

OCCUPATION:
Tree Trimmer

SCENE:
Private residence

EVENT TYPE:
Struck by

Storm-damaged fir trees leaning against maple tree the trimmer was cutting when he died.

For a slideshow version, click here.

SHARP
Safety & Health Assessment & Research for Prevention

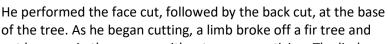Washington State Department of Labor & Industries

Trimmer Struck by Limb from Storm-damaged Tree

SUMMARY

"He was probably the best tree guy I knew," said a young tree worker of his co-worker, a 51-year-old tree trimmer who died when he was struck in the head by a falling limb. The trimmer was a certified arborist for a commercial and residential tree service and landscaping company who shared his expertise in online videos and on social media.

He was sent with a three-person crew to fall a storm-damaged bigleaf maple in the backyard of a private residence. He was in charge of the crew and job site. The maple was supporting two uprooted Douglas firs and a mass of broken branches. The firs were to fall when the maple was cut down. The trimmer climbed to the top of the maple, cut a few branches with a chainsaw, and climbed back down to cut the remaining 38-foot section of the tree to a low stump.

Broken limb that dislodged, fell, and struck the trimmer in the forehead.

He performed the face cut, followed by the back cut, at the base of the tree. As he began cutting, a limb broke off a fir tree and got hung up in the canopy without anyone noticing. The limb was 14-feet long, around four-inches thick, and weighed between 70 to 100 pounds. While doing the back cut, the maple formed a vertical crack that dislodged the broken limb. When the trimmer looked up toward the sound of the crack, the limb fell straight down, striking him in the forehead. A crewmember called 911 and began CPR until first responders arrived and pronounced the trimmer dead at the scene.

Following the incident, investigators found:

- Tree workers were exposed to being struck from above by loose or broken limbs.
- Crew members who were standing by were not positioned at a safe distance from the tree at least two times the height of the tree or trunk being removed.
- The employer's accident prevention program (APP) was not effectively enforced.

REQUIREMENTS

- Provide employees a workplace free from recognized hazards that are causing, or are likely to cause, serious injury or death. See WAC 296-800-11005

RECOMMENDATIONS

FACE investigators concluded that, to help prevent similar incidents:

- Develop APP policies that requires a job site assessment before any tree removal. Identify loose limbs, hangers, broken tops, chunks, lodged trees, leaning trees, snags, and other overhead material. Assess the area for hazards and obstacles listed in ANSI Z133-2017, Section C. Manual Tree Felling Procedure.
- Use a bucket truck, binoculars or, where permissible, drone technology to visually detect overhead hazards concealed in the tree canopy.
- Plan an escape route and maintain situational awareness in the drop zone. Look up, down and all around before, during, and after tree removal. As damaged trees are being felled, use a spotter and pause often to check for hanging or lodged limbs before continuing. Stay alert for environmental changes that could worsen tree hazard risks, such as wind, snow, ice, slopes, and obscured visibility. Ensure required personal protective equipment (PPE) is worn in work area.

RESOURCES

Tree Trimming Safety Fact Sheet and Solutions for Tree Care Hazards – OSHA