

FACE Investigation 91CO004

SUBJECT: Self-employed wood cutter dies when tree falls on him.

SUMMARY:

A 22-year-old wood cutter died from injuries sustained when a large tree he had cut suddenly released and fell across his back.

The victim was felling a cottonwood tree that was to be cut and sold for firewood. After making two cuts with a chain saw, the victim was walking around the tree to determine why it had not fallen. The tree suddenly gave way and fell on the victim. The Colorado Department of Health (CDH) investigator concluded that, in order to prevent future similar occurrences, employers should:

- \* survey the work-site to identify hazards. All employees should then be informed of the possible hazards.
- \* consider and address worker safety in the planning phase of projects.

INTRODUCTION:

On January 18, 1991 a 22-year-old self-employed wood cutter died of injuries sustained when the tree he was cutting suddenly fell on him.

A routine screening of state death certificates by the Colorado Department of Health (CDH) for work-related fatalities prompted the investigation of this fatal injury. The owner of the property was contacted, site photographs were taken and reports were obtained from the local sheriff's department and the county coroner.

The victim in this incident is an independent owner/operator of a wood cutting business. The victim had been in this business for 12 months and did not employ any additional personnel.

#### INVESTIGATION:

The victim contracted with property owners to remove trees that were then cut into firewood and sold to a local firewood broker. At 10:20 a.m. on the morning of the incident, the victim was observed by the property owner using his chainsaw to fell a large cottonwood tree. The tree was approximately 50 feet in height and 30 inches in diameter. The tree was located in a field 1/4 mile from any buildings and formed part of a natural wind break. The victim made an initial 90 degree cut partially through the tree and then a 65 degree cut higher up the trunk. Branches from the tree were intertwined with adjacent trees and prevented the tree from falling. The victim apparently was walking around the tree when a supporting branch broke causing the tree to detach from the stump and fall onto the victim.

#### CAUSE OF DEATH:

The cause of death was determined to be a massive chest trauma and asphyxiation.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION:

Recommendation #1:Employers should conduct a job site survey to identify potential hazards, implement appropriate control measures, and provide subsequent training to employees that specifically addresses all identified site hazards.

Recommendation #2:Employers should address worker safety in the planning phase of all projects.

Discussion: Worker safety issues should be discussed and incorporated into all projects during the planning stages and throughout the entire project. The planning for and incorporation of safety measures, prior to any work being performed at job sites, will help to identify potential worker hazards so that preventive measures can be implemented at the site.

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