



The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

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# Tree Trimmer Foreman Dies After Being Struck by a Pickup Truck – South Carolina

FACE 9407

## SUMMARY

A 21-year-old male tree trimmer foreman (the victim) died after being struck by a pickup truck while feeding brush into a wood chipper. The victim and a co-worker (a climber) had been cutting brush for the local utility company along a powerline right-of-way for 2 days. At 4:30 p.m. on the second day, the two men were feeding the remaining brush that had been cut that day into the wood chipper attached to the rear of their truck. The victim was walking from the woods with an armload of brush while the co-worker was entering the woods to gather a load of brush. When the victim arrived at the chipper he dropped the load of brush on the ground and began to feed it into the chipper a little at a time. As the co-worker was gathering brush, he heard a loud crash and turned to see that a small pickup truck had struck the victim, then the chipper. The co-worker pressed the emergency button on the truck radio which alerted the utility company to summon the emergency medical squad (EMS). When the EMS arrived, they could not detect any vital signs and summoned the county coroner, who pronounced the victim dead at the scene. The driver of the truck was life flighted to the hospital in critical condition. NIOSH investigators concluded that, in order to prevent similar incidents, employers should:

- ensure that a flagman or lookout is present while work is being performed on the sides of roadways normally open to the public
- ensure that employees wear high visibility clothing while performing operations on the sides of roadways normally open to the public.

## INTRODUCTION

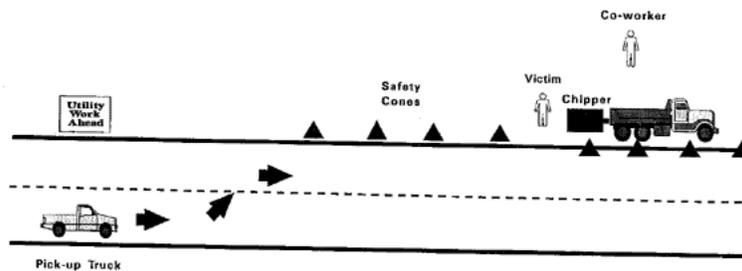
On February 21, 1994, a 21-year-old male tree trimmer foreman (the victim) died after being struck by a pickup truck while feeding brush into a wood chipper along a roadside. On February 27, 1994, officials of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration of the State of South Carolina (SCOSHA) notified the Division of Safety Research (DSR) of this fatality, and requested technical assistance. On March 23, 1994, a DSR safety specialist conducted an investigation of the incident. The incident was reviewed with the SCOSHA compliance officer assigned to the case, the county coroner, and the investigating highway patrol officer. Photographs taken immediately after the incident were viewed during the investigation.

The employer in this incident was a tree trimming company that employed 4,000 in two States, 400 at the establishment at which the victim worked. The company had a written comprehensive safety program and a written safety policy. Corporate safety meetings were held on a quarterly basis, and weekly crew safety meetings were conducted at the jobsite by the crew foreman. Training was also conducted on the job. The employer furnished all safety equipment, including orange safety vests, ear plugs, hard hats, leather chaps, climbing gear, safety cones, and “Men Working” signs. All workers were

certified in first aid. Workers were required to wear the orange safety vests in the woods during the hunting season and at intersections. At other times the safety vests were worn at the discretion of the crew foreman. The victim had been employed by the company for 9 months, 2 months as a crew foreman. This was the first fatality experienced by the company.

## INVESTIGATION

The company had been contracted by a local utility to clear a powerline right-of-way in a wooded area near a power plant. The two-man crew (a foreman [the victim] and a climber) had been at the site for 2 days. At 4:30 p.m. on the second day, as the job was nearing completion, the victim and the climber were cleaning up the remaining brush that had been cut in the woods and carrying it to the wood chipper located at the side of a two-way, two-lane State highway. The wood chipper and truck were located approximately 4 feet off the side of the highway. The wood chipper was attached to the company truck by a 2-inch trailer ball. The truck's wheels had been chocked. Orange safety cones, 28 inches high, were placed at the side of the highway in front of the truck, at the truck door, at the rear of the truck, and at the wheels of the chipper. Four cones were also placed at 15-foot intervals behind the chipper. A 48-inch-square "Utility Work Ahead" sign was placed on the same side of the highway as the truck, behind the chipper (Figure).



The workers were wearing their green work uniforms without orange vests. The utility company's right-of-way supervisor had inspected the worksite 12 hours prior to the incident and reported the job to be setup properly. At the time of the incident, the climber had just finished feeding a load of brush into the chipper and was walking into the woods to gather another load. He passed the victim walking toward him with a load of brush. When he arrived at the chipper, the victim dropped the load of brush on the ground at the chipper and began to feed the brush a little at a time into the chipper. As the climber was gathering brush, he heard a loud crash and turned to see the victim lying in the highway and a pickup truck against the chipper with the driver's head resting against the steering wheel. The climber immediately ran to the company truck and pressed the emergency button on the radio, which alerted the utility company to dispatch an emergency medical squad (EMS) to the scene. He then ran to the victim. Although he could not detect any vital signs, he did not begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) because of the extent of the victim's injuries. He then provided basic first aid to the truck driver, who was unconscious, but breathing. When the EMS arrived they summoned the county coroner and the lifeflight helicopter. The county coroner pronounced the victim dead at the scene, and the truck driver was lifeflighted to the hospital where he was listed in critical condition.

The investigating highway patrol officer's report stated that all the safety cones had been run over and that no braking skid marks were present on the dry road. The wood chipper had been torn away from the truck and was destroyed and the company truck had moved forward 8 feet. The officer estimated the speed of the pickup truck at the time of impact, was between 50 and 55 miles per hour. The posted speed limit was 55 miles per hour. The pickup truck driver stated to physicians at the hospital that he had no memory of the incident.

## CAUSE OF DEATH

The coroner listed the cause of death as closed head trauma and multiple fractures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

**Recommendation #1: Employers should ensure that a flagman or lookout is present while work is being performed on the sides of roadways normally open to the public.**

Discussion: In this incident, both workers alternately fed brush into the chipper while the other gathered brush in the woods. It would have been possible for both workers to gather a quantity of brush, then alternate feeding brush into the chipper while the other acted as a lookout for oncoming traffic. The lookout could issue a warning if oncoming traffic approached in a manner that would pose a threat to the safety of the workers.

**Recommendation #2: Employers should ensure that employees wear high visibility clothing while performing operations on the sides of roadways normally open to the public.**

Discussion: Although the highway patrol and the utility company found no violations in the setup of the tree-trimming equipment at the jobsite, the use of high visibility clothing may have alerted the driver of the pickup truck of the foreman's position after the pickup began to hit the safety cones. The National Safety Council's Accident Prevention Manual for Industrial Operations in its classification of PPE (subheading-special clothing) recommends the use of high visibility and night hazard clothing for construction, utility, and maintenance workers; and police officers and firefighters whose work exposes them to traffic hazards. Additionally, ANSI D6.1-1971 requires that in positioning flagmen, consideration must be given to maintaining color contrast between the flagman's protective garments and his/her background.

## REFERENCES

National Safety Council [1988]. Accident Prevention Manual for Industrial Operations- Administrations and Programs; Ninth Edition, pg. 366.

ANSI [1971]. Ansi D6.1-1971. The American National Standards Institute, New York, New York 1971.

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