

Occupational Health Branch • California Department of Public Health
850 Marina Bay Pkwy, P-3, Richmond, CA 94804
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INCIDENT HIGHLIGHTS

**DATE:**

April 26, 2024

**TIME:**

1:30 p.m.

**VICTIM:**

39-year-old tree trimmer

**INDUSTRY/NAICS CODE:**

Tree trimming / 561730

**EMPLOYER:**

Self-employed

**SAFETY & TRAINING:**

None

**SCENE:**

Backyard of a private residence

**LOCATION:**

California

**EVENT TYPE:**

Asphyxiation



REPORT#: 24CA001

REPORT DATE: April 10, 2025

Palm Tree Trimmer Dies from Asphyxia When Crushed by Palm Fronds — California

SUMMARY

On April 26, 2024, a 39-year-old male Hispanic tree trimmer was trimming a palm tree in the back yard of a private residence. The victim was not a certified or licensed tree trimmer. He climbed underneath the dead palm fronds and started cutting them from the tree. The skirt of dead palm fronds directly above him broke loose and slid down, compressing him against the tree trunk and suffocating him...[READ THE FULL REPORT](#) (p.3)

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Key contributing factors identified in this investigation include:

- Improper work practices (removing fronds from below)
- Not using the correct equipment to do the job safely
- Homeowner hiring tree trimmers and supervisors that are not certified or licensed...[LEARN MORE](#) (p.4)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The California FACE (CA/FACE) investigator determined that, in order to prevent similar incidents, landscapers and self-employed tree trimmers should ensure that:

- Palm tree trimming or removal is performed by workers trained and certified by organizations such as the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).
- Proper work procedures and equipment are used, such as an aerial lift and cutting fronds from above.

Homeowners should:

- Hire tree trimmers who are certified by organizations such as ISA and have a tree and palm contractor's license (C-49).

Local counties or cities should:

- Consider adopting regulations that require a permit for trimming residential palm trees... [LEARN MORE](#) (p.5)



CALIFORNIA

State **FACE** Program

Fatality Assessment & Control Evaluation

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Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program

This case report was developed to draw the attention of employers and employees to a serious safety hazard and is based on preliminary data only. This publication does not represent final determinations regarding the nature of the incident, cause of the injury, or fault of employer, employee, or any party involved.

This Case report was developed by the California Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program. California FACE is a NIOSH-funded occupational fatality surveillance program with the goal of preventing fatal work injuries by studying the worker, the work environment, and the role of management, engineering, and behavioral changes in preventing future injuries. The FACE program is located in the California Occupational Health Branch, California Department of Public Health.

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INTRODUCTION

On Friday, April 26, 2024, at approximately 1:30 p.m., a 39-year-old male Hispanic tree trimmer (victim) died while trimming a palm tree in the back yard of a residence. The CA/FACE investigator received notification of this incident on May 4, 2024, from the weekly summary from the California Department of Industrial Relations Public Information Office. The CA/FACE investigator was not able to interview the owner of the property where the incident occurred. On September 4, 2024, a phone interview took place with the victim's wife and son. The police and fire department reports (including co-worker statements) were received and reviewed.

EMPLOYER

The victim was self-employed and was to be paid by a homeowner to trim a palm tree in her back yard.

WRITTEN SAFETY PROGRAMS and TRAINING

The tree trimmer (self-employed) did not have a written safety or injury and illness prevention program (IIPP). There was no documentation that he completed any formal training on tree trimming.

WORKER INFORMATION

The worker in this incident had been trimming trees for ten years. He did not have a tree and palm contractor's license (C-49), and he was not a certified tree trimmer. He learned the trade from family members who also trimmed trees in Guatemala. His primary language was Spanish.

INCIDENT SCENE

The incident scene was in the back yard of a private residence. The property had multiple overgrown palm trees in the back yard. The palm trees were approximately 50 feet high, and the dead fronds covered most of the palm tree trunk (Exhibit 1).



Exhibit 1. The palm trees prior to being trimmed. Photo courtesy Google.

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WEATHER

The weather on the day of the incident was mostly clear with temperatures in the mid 60's and 5 MPH wind [Weather Underground]. The weather is not believed to have been a contributing factor in this incident.

INVESTIGATION

On the day of the incident, the victim and his wife were knocking on neighborhood doors soliciting work to trim trees. At approximately 12:00 p.m., the victim offered to trim four palm trees in the back yard of a homeowner. The homeowner instructed the victim to proceed with trimming one palm tree. The victim climbed the palm tree and trimmed the fronds from below using a rope attached to a climbing harness around his waist, a lanyard to go around the tree, and climbing gaffs (spikes) that attached to his boots. He placed a ladder against the tree and climbed up, then tethered himself to the tree and continued climbing to the dead palm fronds approximately 30 feet up. When he reached the fronds, he climbed under the hanging fronds and started to pull and cut them off. He did not use an aerial lift or climbing gear that could place him above the fronds. Some fronds fell to the ground while others were suspended by those that were uncut. As the victim continued to pull those above him, the remaining fronds collapsed around and onto him, pressing against his chest and suffocating him.

At approximately 1:30 p.m., the homeowner heard the victim shouting for help. The homeowner went outside, saw the victim approximately 30 feet up in the tree trapped underneath the dead palm fronds, and called 911. Multiple fire and rescue units arrived on the scene. Rescue personnel could not reach the victim with an aerial ladder due to the back yard location, so they used a 40-foot extension ladder to reach the victim (Exhibit 2). When they reached him, he was pronounced deceased and subsequently lowered to the ground.



Exhibit 2. Incident scene and fire department rescue/recovery attempt.
Photo courtesy of Onscene TV.

CAUSE OF DEATH

According to the county coroner, the cause of death was traumatic asphyxia.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Occupational injuries and fatalities are often the result of one or more contributing factors or key events in a larger sequence of events that ultimately result in the injury or fatality. CA/FACE investigators identified the following unrecognized hazards as key contributing factors in this incident:

- Improper work practices (removing fronds from below)
- Not using the correct equipment to do the job safely
- Homeowner hiring tree trimmers that are not certified or licensed

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

The CA/FACE investigator determined that, in order to prevent similar incidents, landscapers or self-employed tree trimmers should ensure that:

Recommendation #1: Palm tree trimming or removal is performed by workers trained and certified by organizations such as the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

Discussion: In this incident, the victim had ten years' experience trimming trees, and according to his family, had trimmed many palms with excessive frond growth. In this incident, the victim trimmed the palm fronds from below and did not use the proper equipment to place him above the dead palm fronds. The ISA certifies tree trimmers in all aspects of job safety, including the best methods for trimming palm trees. ISA-certified tree workers (climber specialists and arborists) must attend formal training and pass a knowledge and skills exam conducted by trained evaluators. Although the victim had many years' experience, he was not specifically trained by the ISA. If the victim had been certified by the ISA, he may have recognized the hazards posed by palm fronds and cut them from above, thereby preventing this fatality.

Recommendation #2: Proper work procedures and equipment are used, such as an aerial lift and cutting fronds from above.

Discussion: Safe methods for trimming palm trees include using a bucket truck or aerial device equipped with fall protection. Alternatively, a climbing procedure that suspends the worker from above the fronds can be used. Fronds should be trimmed from above when there is more than 3 years of frond growth. The climbing procedure should only be used by a trained and experienced tree worker, and involves:

- Using ropes, tools, and equipment designed for tree trimming work, and assuring this equipment is checked and serviced on a regular basis.
- Installing a throw line through the top of the palm tree needing trimming with the use of a tool called the "big shot throw launching system."
- Attaching an approved anchor line and pulley (block) to the throw line.

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- Threading an approved climbing line through the block and hauling the block into the canopy, above the skirt of dead fronds. The climbing line must be long enough that when the block is raised, both ends of the climbing line will reach the ground.
- Securing the anchor line away from the base of the tree.
- Tying a friction hitch to the climbing line before ascending the tree, so that the worker is secured against falling at all times while aloft.
- Having one or two ground workers available, properly trained and equipped to assist the climber if needed.

The CA/FACE video, [Preventing Palm Tree Trimmer Fatalities](#), available in English and [Spanish](#), demonstrates this procedure.

Recommendation #3: Homeowners should only hire tree trimmers who are certified by organizations such as ISA. In California, homeowners should also hire tree trimmers who have a tree and palm contractor's license (C-49).

In this incident, the homeowner hired someone who was not ISA-certified. An ISA-certified tree worker (climber specialist or arborist) is an individual who has met specific qualifications and has demonstrated an acceptable level of skill and proficiency. When using certified tree workers, homeowners can be assured that these companies more likely will:

- Have policies that promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the public
- Ensure that tree trimming is performed in a safe, competent, and professional manner
- Adhere to the laws, regulations, and standards governing tree trimming
- Understand hazards that are local/regional in nature (e.g. special risks that are unique to palm trees)
- Provide resolution to disputes that arise from tree trimming activities
- Educate consumers so that they make informed choices

Had the homeowner hired a tree trimmer or supervisor who was certified, the palm fronds may have been trimmed using the proper procedures, thereby preventing this incident.

In addition, homeowners should only hire individuals or companies who have a current tree and palm contractor's license (C-49) (in states where this is applicable). Under certain circumstances, homeowners may be liable for worker injuries or deaths that occur on their property if they hire unlicensed tree service companies.

Recommendation #4: Local counties or cities should consider adopting regulations that require a permit for trimming residential palm trees.

Discussion: In this incident, the homeowner utilized a self-employed individual to trim the palm tree in her back yard. Homeowners often pay for landscape and tree trimming services and may not know if the individual or companies have been trained, certified, or licensed. In the last ten years, there have been 112 fatalities among workers who were trimming trees in California. Among these, the CA/FACE program has



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investigated seven previous fatalities where workers have been crushed by palm fronds. In all these palm tree incidents, the victim was self-employed or worked for small companies that had not adequately trained or supervised their workers.

There are requirements in some cities and counties for a homeowner to obtain a permit prior to trimming some types of trees. These requirements generally pertain to preservation of tree species and trimming or removal of larger trees in right of ways or public areas. These permits do not apply specifically to palm trees or require homeowners to use contractors with a tree and palm contractor's license (C-49).

Permits are written authorizations issued by a city or county to perform construction or other projects safely and to code. Cities and counties often issue permits to licensed contractors prior to performing construction, repair, and remodeling. At the current time, any company or individual can trim a palm tree, and specific expertise is not required. The issuance of a permit to trim a palm tree should include the requirement that at a minimum individuals or companies hold ISA certification and a tree and palm contractor's license (C-49 in California). This would help ensure that those performing palm tree trimming are properly trained, skilled in their task, and have the proper equipment to perform the job safely. If the victim had been required to obtain this type of permit, he may have performed the job safely and not worked underneath the fronds.

DISCLAIMER

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REFERENCES:

Division of Occupational Safety and Health – Title 8 Regulations. Subchapter 7. General Industry Safety Orders; Group 3. General Plant Equipment and Special Operations; Article 12. Tree Work, Maintenance or Removal:

Cal/OSHA [California Code of Regulations, Title 8, Section 3421. General.](#)

Cal/OSHA [California Code of Regulations, Title 8, Section 3427. Safe Work Procedures.](#)

California FACE Program [Preventing Palm Tree Trimmer Fatalities Video](#) and [Palm Tree Resource Page](#).

Cal/OSHA [Tree Work Safety Guide](#)

Firefighter Nation Magazine [Team-Based Palm Tree Rescue](#)

OSHA Website [Tree Care Industry Safety](#)

California Code of Regulations. Title 16, Division 8, Article 3. [Classifications. C-49 – Tree and Palm Contractor](#)



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INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION

This investigation was conducted and authored by Hank Cierpich, Fatality Investigator/Consultant. Additional contributions to the report were provided by Robert Harrison, MD, MPH, CDPH FACE Project Officer; Laura Styles, MPH, FACE Research Scientist; Glenn Shor, PhD, and Ryan Furtkamp, Cal/OSHA CFI Program.