

Case 281. 40-year-old co-owner of a logging firm died when he was struck by a falling tree.

A 40-year-old male co-owner of a logging firm died when he was struck by a falling tree. The incident occurred in a heavily wooded area of private property. Cherry trees to be felled and removed from the site had been marked. One of the decedent's coworkers was nearby spotting the operation and another coworker was in the staging area where he was piling logs for shipping. The decedent made a proper notch and back cut in the cherry tree and it fell in the direction intended. While falling, it appeared that the tree rotated 180 degrees as demonstrated by the orientation of the notch; the notch was facing up rather than facing the ground or fall line. As the cherry tree fell, it struck smaller trees, bending them backwards. When the trees snapped back, they struck surrounding dead trees and limbs, setting off a domino falling of the dead trees, came around to the side and circled back to the decedent's position as he was moving away from the fall line toward the next tree to be cut. A tree that was falling back towards them struck another dead tree, causing a 6-inch diameter by 6-foot-long upper section of this tree to break off. The decedent was in the appropriate retreat path 12-15 feet behind where the selected cherry tree was felled when he was struck on the right side of his head by the broken section of tree. The decedent was wearing head, eye and hearing protection during the cutting process. The spotter ran to the staging area and contacted his coworker. Because the crew did not have cell phones, one of the workers ran to a nearby home. The homeowner contacted emergency response. CPR was given to the decedent while awaiting emergency response arrival. He was declared dead at the scene.

MIOSHA General Industry Safety and Health Division did not issue a violation citation at the conclusion of its investigation. Two Safety and Health Recommendations were issued:

1. During tree cutting, employees can be crushed and killed by falling trees. Select cutting of trees (in heavily wooded areas) poses hazards greater than those present during clear-cutting operations. During select cutting, other trees are frequently in the path of the tree being felled and may be struck by the felled tree. The branches of surrounding trees may be entangled with the tree that is selected for cutting. These can alter the fall path of the tree; they can also cause nearby trees to fall from unexpected directions or in a chain reaction. Therefore, additional safeguards should be implemented during select cutting.
2. Prior to tree felling, the employee should survey the wooded area to identify how the selected tree's fall path can be affected by nearby trees or how the selected tree can cause other trees to topple. The employee should plan for hazards that are not described in MIOSHA Occupational Safety Standard, Part 51 Logging, Rule 5151(2). In addition, companies should ensure that the feller and all other employees not only retreat from the felled tree as required by Part 51, but also maintain continuous visual observation of all surrounding trees until all chain reactions from the nearby trees have ceased.