New Regional Emphasis Program for Tree and Landscape Operations

By David Boutin, Safety Consultant

OSHA has identified a problem in tree care and landscaping operations. The first 6 months of FY 2021 were rough for tree and landscaping companies. OSHA Region 1 (New England states) fatalities show 25% of reported non-COVID deaths occurred in the tree care and landscaping industry. Year to date, in Connecticut alone, there have been 3 reported tree fatalities.

When one industry has one quarter of all fatalities it gets attention quickly. In April, OSHA identified a problem with tree care and landscaping activities in Region 1. On August 4, 2021 OSHA issued a Regional Emphasis Program for Tree and Landscaping operations in Region 1. Unlike some previous emphasis programs that address a specific piece of equipment or work activity, this emphasis program targets a range of hazards.

Aside from being hard and dirty work, it doesn’t seem really bad when most homeowners own a chain saw to cut down trees and large branches. Chances are homeowners are getting hurt but we just don’t have a mechanism for collecting the data. Worker fatalities unfortunately show concern is justified. Tree care and landscaping operations are dangerous work!

Trees are heavy and have lots of branches. The homeowners that hire landscaping services to do yard work like cutting grass, raking leaves and shoveling snow often decide to do it themselves when they get a price for cutting a tree, especially when they already have a chain saw and ladder.

For tree services and landscapers, the reality is that cutting trees causes serious injuries and death. Consider also that homeowners are doing the easy trees themselves. This means tree companies aren’t getting called for the easy ones. Tree companies get called for trees that have problems exceeding the homeowner’s ability.

Big trees. Leaning trees. Tall trees. Wires in trees. Dead trees. Icy trees. Rotten trees. Hollow trees. Trees next to houses. Trees near streets. There are many kinds of hazards that make cutting a tree dangerous work. Dead trees and broken branches might be visible if you know to look for them. Other hazards you may not know about until you actually start cutting, like the tree possibly being hollow or cracked. When hazards are identified or properly addressed, a difficult job can end up being a deadly job.

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Hazards may not even involve the tree. Safety precautions should begin before you get to the site. Tree workers may not work during an actual hurricane or blizzard, but they are often some of the first people out after the storm passes. Drivers may need to deal with downed power lines, wind, snow, ice, wet leaves or other traffic while driving to the site. Once at the site, the same hazards can affect walking, and climbing too. Trees near the street often expose employees to cars and truck traffic.

The Regional Emphasis Program (REP) addresses common hazards specific to tree and landscaping operations. The REP directs OSHA Compliance Safety and Health Officers (CSHOs) to initiate an inspection when hazardous tree work is observed. A guidance document supports the REP and provides a list of items for CSHOs to evaluate when they inspect tree and landscaping operations under the REP.

The biggest hazards causing most of the fatalities are nothing new. The primary hazards: Struck By, Falls and Electrical hazards are some of the most frequent causes of worker deaths. Other hazards include fire, material handling, machine guarding, first aid and hearing loss.

Struck By: In Connecticut, the leading cause of death during tree and landscaping work is being struck by something, usually the tree or parts of the tree. Keep areas below tree work clear of employees while cutting. A drop zone should be established around the tree using cones, barrier tape or other means. The drop zone may be wider than the tree. All employees should wear hard hats while tree work is in progress. When working near the street, people can also be struck by cars and other vehicles. Utilize signs and traffic cones to identify the work zone. Park trucks as a barrier between approaching traffic and workers when possible. Close roads or utilize trained flaggers or police to direct traffic.

Falls, which are usually the leading cause of death, are the second leading cause of death for tree and landscaping workers. During tree work, falls often occur from the trees, ladders or aerial lifts. Employers must assure they implement effective controls to prevent falls. When tying off to a tree, the employee must tie off to a branch that will support their weight. The employee must be careful he will not be connected to or entangled in the section being cut. Aerial lifts must be positioned so they won’t be struck by the tree sections being cut. Employees must be secured with a self-retracting lanyard (SRL) to prevent being ejected from the lift. Ladders must be positioned so they won’t be struck by the tree sections being cut. When the weight of the cut section is removed, the remaining branch may move suddenly and with great force. Do not place extension ladders against the limbs being cut.

Electrical hazards for tree work usually come from power lines. Always look for powerlines. Power lines often pass through tree branches. Pay close attention to where power lines run along the street and from the street to any nearby buildings. Contact with power lines is usually deadly, whether by direct contact or by indirect contact with ladders, tools, branches or any other items. High voltages associated with substations and many transmission and distribution lines can even flow through materials typically considered to be non-conductive, such as kite string. Electricity will take the path of least resistance and can kill you before you even start cutting the tree.

Never perform tree work where there is potential for tools or tree sections to contact power lines unless you are qualified and have the right equipment. Contact the power company to insulate or drop power lines when necessary.

Other Hazards: During the inspection, CSHOs will look for and address other hazards as well. The guidance document lists several areas of concern including flammable liquids, power tools, machine guards, traffic, hearing loss and other concerns.

Tools and equipment used for tree work are capable of causing serious injuries to employees. Assure chaps are used to protect legs from chain saw injuries. Employees cutting wood on the ground should have footwear with protective toes and metatarsal guards to protect the tops of the feet.

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Woodchippers are essential to most tree work. Employees working with woodchippers must have training. Emergency stops must be functional, and all guards must be in place. Assure PPE and clothing cannot become entangled while feeding branches into a chipper. Never reach into the hopper of a running chipper to feed material or clear a jamb.

Tree work and landscaping make frequent use of power tools powered by small engines. This equipment frequently includes noisy two-cycle engines. String trimmers, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, chain saws and woodchippers usually exceed the noise permissible exposure limit. Employers using these tools may need a hearing conservation program and annual hearing tests.

There are also potential hazards not specifically addressed in the guidance document or by specific regulations. When there aren’t specific regulations to cite, OSHA can cite employers under the General Duty clause which requires employers to “furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees.”

Ticks are a relatively new hazard not addressed by a specific regulation. Ticks are a known hazard to employees who perform tree and landscaping work. Tick bites can transmit several serious diseases to employees including Lyme Disease, Babesiosis and Powassan Virus. Employees working outdoors in heavily wooded, brushy or areas of overgrown vegetation should be trained on precautions to prevent tick bites.

If you do tree work or landscaping, you can read the entire guidance document. Review your work activities and perform a Job Hazard Analysis to identify hazards and establish controls for the activities you do at your company.

**Requesting a Consultation**

To learn more or request your free consultation from CONN-OSHA:

Call us at 860-263-6900, or visit our [webpage](#)!
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<td><strong>Intro to OSHA</strong></td>
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<td><strong>12/7/21</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>This class helps business owners gain an understanding of OSHA operations and how to prevent workplace injuries. Includes OSHA background, standards, the inspection process, implementing a safety &amp; health program, and available assistance.</td>
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| **Permit-Required Confined Space**                     |
| **1/11/22**                                            |
| This workshop includes the basic requirements and procedures involved with permit-required confined spaces as detailed in 29CFR1910.146 Permit-Required Confined Spaces. This information is vitally important to all those who work in or have responsibility for those that work in permit-required confined spaces. |

| **Personal Protective Equipment**                      |
| **2/8/22**                                             |
| Protective equipment, including personal protective equipment for eyes, face, head, and extremities, protective clothing, respiratory devices, and protective shields and barriers, shall be provided, used, and maintained in a sanitary and reliable condition wherever it is necessary by reason of hazards of processes or environment, chemical hazards, radiological hazards, or mechanical irritants encountered in a manner capable of causing injury or impairment in the function of any part of the body through absorption, inhalation or physical contact. This workshop will discuss the requirements of 29 CFR 1910 Subpart I, Personal Protective Equipment. |

| **Breakfast Roundtable**                               |
| **3rd Tuesday of the Month**                           |
| These meetings cover subjects ranging from evacuation plans and fire extinguishers to air quality and ergonomics. The intent of these free 90-minute workshops is to discuss safety and health issues in a supportive and informal environment. The roundtable meetings are held from 8:15 am to 9:45 on the third Tuesday of the month. |

*Visit this link for more info and to sign up.*
Tom Retano retired from state service after spending 31 years with CONN-OSHA. During the decades Tom worked as an Occupational Safety Officer, conducting more than 2500 consultation visits in all aspects of construction. In addition to serving as the department’s senior construction safety consultant, he has taught multiple 10- and 30-hour general industry and construction courses as an authorized OSHA Outreach Trainer.

Tom has a BS in Industrial Technology/Occupational Safety and an MS in Industrial Technical Management from Central Connecticut State University. Before joining CONN-OSHA Tom worked as a compliance officer for Federal OSHA in the Hartford area office and he was employed as a radiation safety specialist for the University of Connecticut Health Center and as a loss control representative with the Harford Insurance Group.

Tom has been a member of several professional associations including the American Society of Safety Professionals and the Connecticut Safety Society. He has also been an active participant in the Connecticut Construction Industries Association and the Connecticut Chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors.

In addition to his work at CONN-OSHA Tom has been an adjunct faculty member at Central Connecticut State University where he has taught a variety of safety and health courses.

After his retirement from CONN-OSHA Tom plans to continue his teaching activities. In addition, we expect he will continue to organize and MC music events through the Connecticut Blues Society and the Berlin Lions Club.

Brian Sauvageau retired from CONN-OSHA after working for the department for 11 years. During his tenure with the program Brian worked with the compliance team as both an Occupational Hygienist and as an Occupational Safety Officer. Highlights of his career include working to make the OSHA 10-hour course available to prison inmates before release, ensuring that judicial marshals received body armor as PPE, enhancing indoor air quality in the built environment and raising awareness about tickborne disease and tick bite prevention.

Before joining CONN-OSHA Brian had an extensive career with the US Navy. He enlisted in October 1982 and entered the Hospital Corps in 1985. After attending the US Navy School of Health Sciences Preventive Medicine, he served overseas in Africa, Europe and the Middle East and participated in multiple medical humanitarian missions. When he returned to the States in 1992 he completed a BS in Business Administration and Management at UConn and continued to work in the field of public health as Chief Sanitarian and supervisor with the City of New London Health Department and Senior Sanitarian for the Ledge Light Health District.

When asked what he valued most during his service at CONN-OSHA Brian responded that he valued “working with professional people throughout the State, helping people solve problems, training and educating, and protecting the public. I am always better when I am in the service of others and I value my ethos to never abandon anyone or any place needing my help and protection, even though they did not know it, or know me.”

After his retirement Brian plans to continue to pursue his public health endeavors through consultation, training, and educational initiatives. In addition, we expect him to spend more time in his garden, near the seashore and traveling the world.

How to Subscribe

Contact grayson.gregory@ct.gov and in the subject line type “Subscribe” and then provide your e-mail address in the body of the message.
Hazard Corner: A Groundsman Working on a Tree Trimming Crew Dies When He is Dragged or Propelled onto a Wood Chipper Feed Table

On Monday, November 15, 2010, at approximately 1:30 p.m., a 33-year-old Hispanic groundsman died when he was dragged or struck by a rope that was pulled into a wood chipper. The victim was dragging a branch from the base of a tree to the wood chipper which was approximately 40 feet away. As he passed another tree, the branch became entangled in the white colored climbing rope of the tree trimmer in that tree.

When the victim reached the wood chipper, he fed the tree branch with the entangled climbing rope into the chipper. Although the incident was not witnessed, evidence suggests that as the tree branch entered the chipper, the rope became taut, and the victim was either dragged or knocked onto the feed table, striking his head. As his body landed on the feed table, it most likely struck the safety bar located on the front and shut the machine down.

The tree trimmer, who was approximately 30 feet up in the tree, said he felt a sudden strong and fast pull on his climbing rope, but his flip line prevented him from being pulled from the tree.

Emergency medical services were immediately called (911) and the local fire department responded. Co-workers began CPR and continued until emergency crews arrived. The victim was pronounced dead at the scene. The cause of death according to the death certificate was blunt force neck injury.

The employer of the victim was a professional tree company that provided complete tree care. The company has been in business for 30 years and had 17 employees at the time of the incident.

To prevent future incidents, tree service companies should:

Recommendation #1: Ensure that cut tree branches are staged and free of obstacles before being fed into wood chippers.

In this incident, the victim dragged a tree branch that became tangled in a tree trimmer’s climbing rope that was coiled at the base of the tree. All cut branches and brush should always be inspected just prior to being fed into wood chippers to ensure that they are free of any foreign objects that might do harm to the wood chipper or cause personal injury.

Recommendation #2: Assign another employee as a safety watch whenever cut tree branches are being fed into wood chippers.

In this incident, the victim was working alone even though there were two other employees working on the ground performing similar functions. Many hazardous work assignments, such as high voltage electrical work or confined space work, mandate the use of a safety watch to be present when certain activities occur to help prevent injuries.

Article summarized from CDC State FACE Report