

Harrison County Snag Near Miss

Rapid Lessons Shared



On October 20, 2021, Texas A&M Forest Service (TAMFS) resources were dispatched to a wildfire in northern Harrison County, Texas. During initial attack operations, a pine snag broke off and fell to the ground, narrowly missing two firefighters.

Narrative

The Harrison County Sheriff's Office requested TAMFS assistance on a wildfire with structures threatened on the afternoon of October 20, 2021. Resources that responded were an ICT4, DZOP, and FFT2 (ground man). Upon arrival, multiple local fire departments were already on scene and taking action. After initial briefing with the ICT4, the dozer began establishing line along the right flank of the fire, and the FFT2 followed behind.

While the DZOP established a break around the fire perimeter, the ICT4 was making observations of the fire behavior, relaying that to on-scene resources, and advising everyone to maintain situational awareness and watch for snags. As the DZOP was hooking the head of the fire and starting to come around on the left flank, the ICT4 walked over to the left flank where two Type-6 engines, belonging to local fire departments, were working in the timber with thick undergrowth along a powerline right-of-way. The ICT4 approached the engine operators to let them know that the dozer was going to be coming that direction and have them stop their operations and move to a safe location.

While the ICT4 was talking with one of the engine operators, they were both unaware they were standing approximately 30' away from a fire-weakened snag that was 18" in DBH and 54' tall. At that time, the ICT4 heard a loud "pop". Recognizing that sound to be a tree breaking, he knew they could be in danger, but due to the dense understory, he could not see where the breaking tree was located. At that time, a local firefighter standing in the powerline right-of-way saw the snag starting to fall and yelled very loudly, "Look out!!". This warning made the ICT4 more aware that they were in danger, but he still did not know where to go since he could not see the tree. The snag had broken off at about 15' above the ground, and as it fell, it cast a shadow, revealing its location, so the ICT4 and engine operator ran as fast as they could to safety. The snag fell in the exact location they had been standing. The snag was approximately 9" in DBH at the spot where the firefighters had been standing and had multiple, broken-off branches protruding in all different directions.

After the ICT4 and engine operator had gathered themselves and realized how close they came to being struck by the snag, they made sure to communicate to the resources there on the powerline right-of-way what had happened. The fire was contained by the DZOP shortly thereafter, and during an on-scene AAR, all resources discussed what happened.



Lessons Learned

“That’s what kills firefighters. Driving and snags.” – Agency Administrator

Many wildland firefighter injuries and fatalities are the result of falling snags. Despite having high situational awareness of the dangers of snags on this fire, two firefighters came dangerously close to being struck. During wildfire operations, or even non-emergency response activities, are you staying heads-up and keeping an eye out for snags? If you see a snag, do you make sure everyone knows it’s there? Do you carry flagging to mark it? Unfortunately, even if you are 100% situationally aware, accidents can still happen, but we must be diligent in our efforts to stay aware and safe.

“It made me realize no matter what I am doing at a fire or incident to make sure you are always looking around for hazards...” – DZOP

While the DZOP on this fire was not in the immediate area when the snag fell, hearing about it made him realize he could be more aware during any kind of operation, no matter what his role may be or what equipment he may be using. If you are operating heavy equipment, are you still keeping an eye out for snags? Is your ground man keeping an eye out and communicating them to you and others?

“We all talked about it in great detail.” – ICT4

When you have a close call or near miss, it may be easy to say, “Whew! That was close!”, and move on about your business. However, sharing your experiences with others helps spread awareness and may prevent a similar incident happening to someone else in the future. The ICT4 on this fire took it upon himself to thoroughly discuss this incident with all on-scene resources for that purpose. Hopefully, sharing this experience far beyond that group will spread that message of awareness even more.

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