

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Chainsaw Kickback

Date: June 16, 2025

Location: Kaibab National Forest
Arizona



Three-inch laceration on the left foot.



The tear in the sawyer's boot.

“I heard a thump sound and immediately thought that’s not the sound a saw makes when it’s cutting a tree.”

– Engine Boss

On June 16th a severity engine was doing project chainsaw work on the Kaibab National Forest. At around 1400 hours a new sawyer experienced kickback while limbing a downed ponderosa pine and cut through his left boot and into his foot, creating a three-inch laceration.

The four-person engine module was on day eight of their 14-day fire severity assignment. The engine module was comprised of employees from different crews. It was their first time working together and things were going well. Two employees had just recently completed S-212 and the Engine Boss commented that the meadow restoration project was a great one for new sawyers to get some trigger time.

“He was doing good. He’s a new sawyer and I was giving him a couple of pointers about limbing and safety.

Prior to the accident nothing was out of the normal.”

– Engine Boss

June 16th was the Engine Crew’s third day working on this project. They started off the workday chipping limbs along the road. In the afternoon they transitioned to more cutting. The intent for the afternoon was to lop and scatter the small trees encroaching on the meadow. They had two saws and were working in groups of two. The injured employee was running one chainsaw and the Engine Boss was working directly with him. After about 40 minutes of cutting, the sawyer dropped a small ponderosa pine tree and was cutting off some of its limbs. As he was limbing, he noticed the bole of the tree was wobbling so he put his left foot on it to hold it steady.

“I’d seen other people putting their foot on the bole and that’s what I did to hold the tree steady.”

– Sawyer



He cut a limb with the bottom of his bar. After feeling it starting to pinch, he moved the saw to the other side and used the top of his bar while keeping his foot in place on the bole. As he made the finishing cut, the tip of saw made contact with the bole and immediately kicked upward—striking the side of his left boot.

Photo shows the actual ponderosa pine the sawyer was limbing and his approximate body positioning. The red star shows the approximate location the bar tip struck the side of the bole, resulting in kickback that sent the saw bar upward directly into his boot.

The sawyer was immediately frustrated. “I knew I hit my boot but didn’t know I was cut,” he said. The Engine Boss got him to shut down his saw and asked if he hit his boot.

The sawyer responded “Yes” and they took a look. The Engine Boss could see the torn boot and a little bit of blood.

They walked over to the engine and the Engine Boss, who is also an EMT, grabbed his Stop the

Bleed kit off his belt and packed the wound and wrapped it. They then transported the employee to the hospital in the engine. The laceration was three inches; the employee received a total of 15 stitches to seal it up.

Lessons Learned from the Engine Crew’s Perspective

- ❖ When operating a chainsaw, you always need to pay attention to body position. Be aware of body placement and how that correlates with potential kickback.
- ❖ Keep a Stop the Bleed kit with you. On this engine module every employee carries a kit. Tourniquets are great when you need them. But in this case QuickClot Gauze and some wrap was all that was needed to control the bleeding.
- ❖ New sawyers have a lot to think about. Focus on the basics and don’t overload them.

“When we’re on a fire we always prioritize LCES and good communication. Do we get complacent when we’re just doing project work?”

– Injured Employee’s Co-Worker

- ❖ Good training and a calm demeanor can go miles in an emergency. The crew knew where their medical equipment was and how to respond in an emergency.
- ❖ Find your motivation to stay safe. After cutting himself, the employee thought about the implications of not being able to work and what that would mean for his family. Nobody wants to get hurt, but what else motivates you to stay safe?
- ❖ Rapid team building is important. This was the first time this group had worked together on an engine. But by day eight, after having dinner together every night, telling stories, and sharing jokes, they’d quickly built a good rapport. That helped develop the trust and teamwork that was essential on the day of the injury.
- ❖ Trained medical personnel are a huge asset. This injury occurred in a remote area, having an EMT on the module was a benefit.
- ❖ Lean on the local resources if they are available. The engine crew was grateful the local Fire Operations Specialist was on scene to provide help. His knowledge kept small tasks small and made the process go much smoother.
- ❖ The Forest had been having radio issues for weeks. In this situation they were unable to call Dispatch on the radio and had to rely on a cell phone. Always make sure you have communications prior to starting project work. A serious injury can happen at any time.



Left foot after three stitches on the inside and 12 on the outside.



Small, easy to carry Stop the Bleed kit.



Contents of the Stop the Bleed kit.

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