

NWCG Risk Management Committee

Safety Warning: 22-01

September 12, 2022



To: Wildland Fire Community, Agency Administrators, Duty Officers, Fire Management Officers, Resource Advisors, Incident Management Teams

From: Eric Fransted, Chair, NWCG Risk Management Committee

Subject: Hazard Tree Awareness for Strategic Decision Makers



Issue: Two fatalities caused by tree strikes occurred in August 2022 on the Big Swamp and Rum Creek fires in Southwest Oregon. Neither event was related to tree felling operations. Both involved fire weakened green trees.

Action: Agency Administrators, Incident Commanders, Incident Safety Officers, Strategic Planners, Operation Section Chiefs, Resource Advisors and Duty Officers should engage in regular and ongoing risk assessments before, during, and after deciding to commit to strategies that place personnel under tree canopy. It is recognized that a zero-risk strategy is not possible in the wildland fire environment.

- Consideration of forest health and observed tree failure should be incorporated into decisions on strategic courses of action.
- Review the Snag Hazard layer on the Risk Management Assistance (RMA) Dashboard, https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/pubs_journals/2022/rmrs_2022_riley_k001.pdf
- Assure tactical decisions follow strategic direction and be prepared to resist allowing resources to commit to high hazard fireline assignments without deliberate discussion and developed mitigation plans.
- Assure risk management discussions are shared with supervisors.
- Medical response planning and resources, to include critical incident support (CISM), should continue to be developed by the fire service.

Resources:

- NWCG Hazard Tree and Tree Felling Subcommittee website. <https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/hazard-tree-and-tree-felling-subcommittee>.

Background: A similar green tree failure event occurred in 2021 on the Middle Fork Complex resulting in the death of a firefighter. Other events of this type may warrant a shift in the way we assess risk in our changing environment. Recent fatalities indicate increased potential for tree strikes in drought stressed forests particularly from live trees which may have been impacted by historic fire events. Increased situational awareness and additional risk assessment may be necessary and needs to be factored into strategic decision making at all levels.

We do not have good data about the trend of green tree failure either fire weakened or otherwise. There is a feeling that failure of green trees may be increasing within the fire environment.

Additional Information: None

Contact:

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Additional Links:

Big Swamp Fire Hit by Tree Fatality (2022) - Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center,
<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/orphans/viewincident?DocumentKey=b3097226-b739-4b8c-a2f4-023065674cda>.

Rum Creek Fire Tree Strike Fatality (2022) - Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center,
<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/orphans/viewincident?DocumentKey=c440298a-6be2-4d0f-9455-16e22c37324c>.

Middle Fork Complex Hit by Tree Fatality (2021) - Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center,
<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/orphans/viewincident?DocumentKey=b9e72f29-1484-4cfe-bf12-63946c928d74>.