

Seattle City Light Accident, dated 7 November 08

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Investigated and Reported by Morgan Rice

I.B.E.W. LOCAL 77

On 7 December 08, at approximately 10:30 a.m., a Seattle City Light Apprentice Lineworker was struck in the face while attempting to clear a downed tree from utility lines.

The crew was sent to clear a downed tree that had fallen, taking down the overhead primary, and came to rest on the system neutral, as well as the communication lines below the neutral. The crew arrived and looked over the job, then had a tailboard meeting to discuss how they would clear the tree from the lines. A Journeyman Lineman and a Primary Apprentice went up in a bucket. They first draped a loose line over the neutral and the communication lines, and the crew on the ground tied the loose line off to the railing of the overpass they were working from, snubbing the lines down tight. At this time, the Foreman decided to use nylon slings and a chain hoist instead, and came up on the hoist until there was slack in the loose line. The Foreman then gave the crew in the bucket the okay to resume working.

The Journeyman began cutting away two foot chunks of the tree, to lessen the weight on the lines. The Journeyman stopped about two feet from where the tree lay over the neutral and the communication. By now, the tree was no longer lying on the communication line, but was still on the system neutral. The tree was still about nine inches in diameter where it lay over the neutral. The Journeyman cut away branches that might hang up once the tree fell, and then reached over the neutral and began the undercut. The Journeyman then reached over and began making the top cut. Part way through, the saw became bound up, with the tree pinching the chain. Unable to free the chainsaw, the Journeyman tied the saw off to the bucket, so as not to lose it once the tree fell clear.

The crew decided to use the jib to push on the tree, making it break. The jib was out about two feet. The crew positioned the bucket to the side, and the lip of the bucket was slightly above the end of the tree. When the crew began pushing, the tree snapped at the cut, which was about three feet from the end. The end flipped upwards, and back, striking the Apprentice first, and knocking the Apprentice back into the Journeyman.

The Journeyman immediately grabbed the Apprentice to check on them, and saw their face covered in blood, with a deep laceration at the bridge of the nose. The Journeyman called for the Foreman to call 911, and began flying the

cc: Don G ✓ 12/17/08

bucket down to the truck while talking to the Apprentice, keeping them alert. Once in the cradle, the Apprentice stated they felt nauseous and was not sure they could safely climb down from the bucket. The Journeyman began flying the bucket from the cradle around to where they could set it on the ground. On the way to the ground, and Apprentice lost consciousness. On the ground, the Foreman lifted the Apprentice from the bucket, and the crew began First Aid. The Apprentice regained consciousness, and the Aid Car arrived soon afterward.

The Apprentice was transported to Harborview and underwent surgery. They were released later that evening, but will require further surgeries to repair the damage to the nose. The Journeyman was treated for minor injuries and released the same day.

Conclusions:

1. The neutral being pulled down created a 'stored energy' situation. The crew attempted to negate this hazard by tying the neutral down to the bridge structure with a chain hoist and nylon straps. After the accident, it was noted that the chain hoist held, was still under tension, and neither nylon strap showed signs of being over stretched.
2. The butt of the tree was pinned into a boulder, so it was not going to twist and slip free. When the final cut was begun, the expectation was that the end piece would fall downwards. Both the Foreman and the Journeyman have several years of tree experience, and saw no reason that this would not work as expected.

Recommendations:

1. None.

Note: I asked the Foreman and the Journeyman what they feel they could have done differently to prevent this accident. Both stated that perhaps having the jib fully extended may have bought some room, keeping them a bit further from where the tree was to break. The Journeyman thought perhaps a tag line on the end piece could have been tied off to something, as well. The crew was working from a bridge over a ravine, so a three foot chunk of tree swinging down from a tag line could present other hazards.