

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Falling Trees Near Powerlines

Date: February 6, 2019

Location: Potosi Ranger District
Mark Twain National Forest, Missouri

“Mike picked up the powerline and rolled it up. His thought was that it was dead because of where it had broken off. But in reality, it was the common feed line and he was not grounded. By luck, he lived to tell us what he’d done.”

Zone FMO

NARRATIVE

After the District Safety meeting, Mike, a Timber Crew member, and John, an Engine Crew member, volunteered to address a downed tree along a Forest Service road—an easement through national forest lands to a private inholding—that was blocking a driveway, and also widen this narrow road at the permit holder’s request.

The plan was to use a dozer to push the trees out of the way to widen the road. John had volunteered to go with Mike because he had planned to use the opportunity to learn about using the dozer transport.

Tree Needs to Be Fallen

They arrived at the site at 1250. It was rainy and cloudy with a light fog. Air temperature was 38 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mike hopped out and identified a green 11-inch DBH tree that needed to be fallen to widen the road. Mike asked John to fall the approximately 55-foot tall tree in the direction of the lean. John then grabbed his saw. He first made sure that the dozer transport was safely away from the tree, then proceeded to fall the tree on its lean. The tree fell in the intended direction.

After falling the tree, John proceeded to buck it up and then low stump it. Mike then unloaded the dozer and started pushing and knocking down hazard trees.

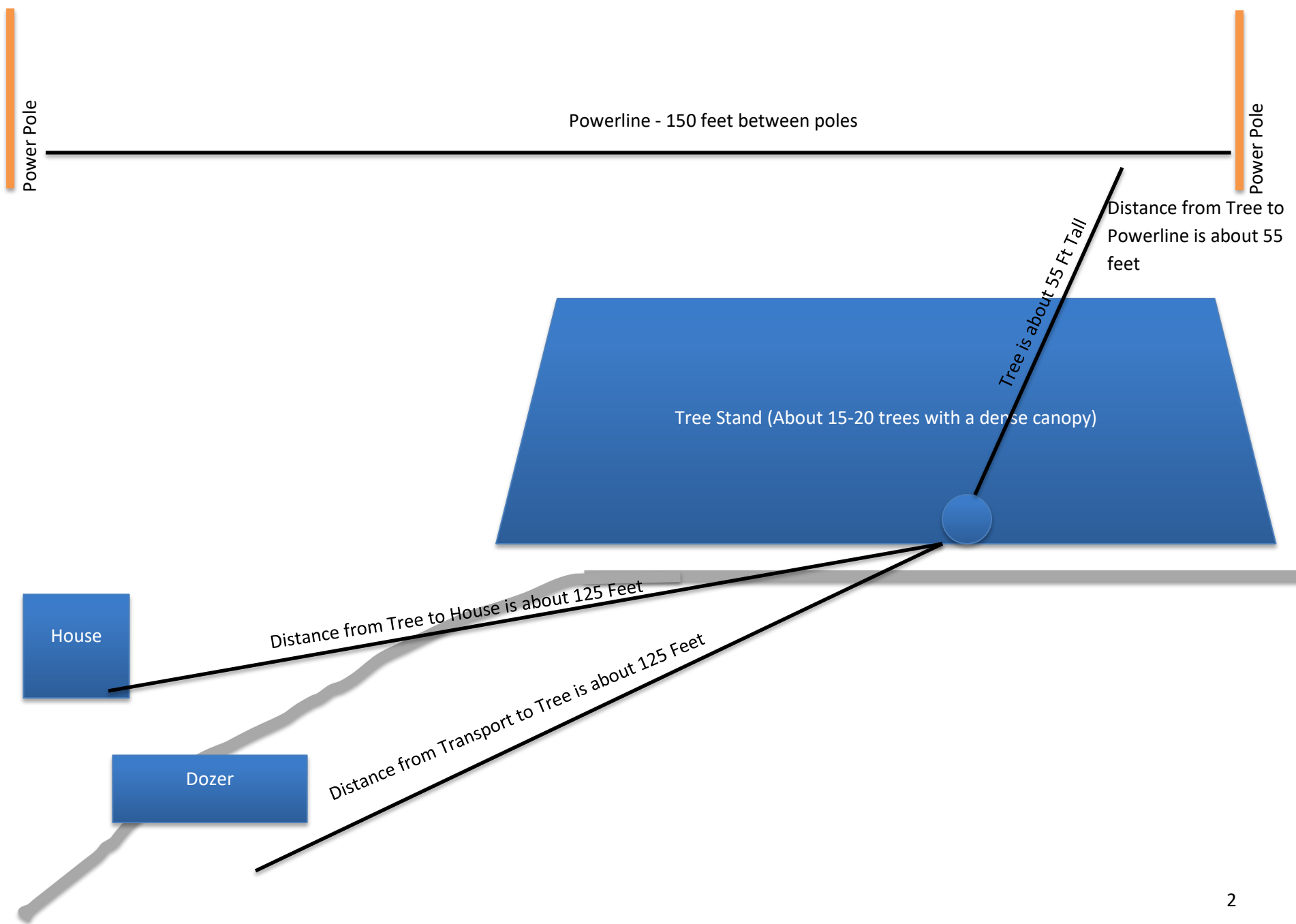
Powerline Observed Under Fallen Tree

After the dozer work was completed, as Mike was loading the dozer back onto the transport, he noticed that there was what appeared to be a powerline under the tree that John had just fallen.

Mike and John further investigated. They determined that the powerline under the tree looked to be severed about 75 feet from the tree, between two power poles. The line did not appear to be active. However, this was not confirmed. Furthermore, it was not clear whether or not the line had previously been down—or if falling the tree had torn it down.



This is the point from which John did his short tree analysis prior to falling the tree. The powerline can't be seen or identified.



They realized that there were other dead trees in the lay of the land that Mike had pushed in with the dozer that could have also been the culprit for bringing down the powerline.

Mike Picks Up the Downed Powerline

Mike believed that the line was dead because of where it had broken off. He therefore cleared the line out from under John's fallen tree by picking it up in his hands and rolling it up.

Mike and John decided that they would report this downed line when they returned to the office—and try to confirm from the landowner if the line had been down previous to their falling the tree. They proceeded to the office and reported everything about this incident to the AFMO.



The top of the fallen tree that covered the powerline.

LESSONS

Very Hazardous Situation

The Issue:

When felling any tree remotely close to a powerline—the powerline should be identified prior to starting the saw.

John's Personal After-Action Observations:

"I did not walk around the patch of trees we were felling from. I judged my tree from that point of view only. I did not size my tree. I skipped an abundance of steps outlined in the OHLEC (Objective – Hazards – Leans – Escape Route – Cut Plan)."

Objectives: Widen the road; fell the tree in the direction of the lean.

Hazards/Obstacles: **Did not observe.**

Leans/Binds: It was leaning toward the open meadow.

Escape Route: I had a road on both my 45's.

Cut Plan: Low complexity tree, just a basic back cut needed to cut the tree.

Tree Size: About 11 inches DBH, green tree.

"I didn't ask any details about the project. I didn't take responsibility for my tree. I simply followed a request without inquiring why we were doing it."

"I didn't take the time to do a proper tailgate safety session."

"I didn't follow proper procedure both before the incident and after a potential hazard was identified."

Acknowledging Human Factors

Our situational awareness is never "complete." We all cycle across the spectrum of attentiveness including periods of what can be called "complacency." Some circumstances take specific conscious effort to overcome:

- ✓ Unfamiliar crew partner and crew dynamics—being a passive follower as opposed to an active leader. (John explained that he was used to felling with his engine crew members. "I wasn't used to having to take on such an active role in safety briefings and developing situational awareness.")
- ✓ Last day of work. Perhaps more difficult to keep one's head focused entirely on the task at hand.

- ✓ Tunnel Vision. John: "I went out there to swamp for Mike on dozer operations removing hazard trees threatening a fence line as well as getting familiar with the CDL operations. The tree was a small task on the side. (We felled it to widen the driveway.)"

Lessons for Preventing Such an Incident in the Future

- ✓ SLOW DOWN! Take the time for every tree! No matter how simple.
- ✓ Always walk the lay of your tree.
- ✓ Acknowledge the risk in assuming others will do things for you.
- ✓ Powerlines can be fatal. Back away from the hazard a safe distance and notify the proper authorities.
- ✓ Always work under the assumption that the powerline is live.

This RLS was submitted by: The Zone FMO

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