

Warming fire turns deadly



Illustration by Don Lomax

It was cold, rainy, winter morning in the woods of Oregon, when the company mechanic arrived at the crack of dawn to perform field maintenance on the equipment.

The 37-year-old mechanic was known as a safe and conscientious worker. He had been trained in basic safety procedures, hazard communication and Oregon-OSHA compliance. His company was one of the state's largest logging and construction firms.

As the mechanic began prepping for his work, a coworker started a warming fire using a mixture of diesel fuel and chainsaw gasoline. The coworker walked away from the fire for about 15 minutes to make a cell phone call. Accident investigators believe the mechanic, in an attempt to boost the fire in the coworker's absence, poured straight gasoline from a 5-gallon container onto the smoldering fire. Heat from the fire vaporized the gasoline causing an explosion that engulfed the mechanic in flames.

When the coworker returned to the scene he found the mechanic on the ground a short distance away, still on fire. The 5-gallon plastic gasoline container was also found nearby, burning as well. The mechanic died at the scene as a result of his injuries.

How this accident could have been prevented:

Never pour gasoline on an open flame or smoldering fire or use gasoline near an open flame. In addition to the likelihood of an explosion, the flames can travel up the stream of gasoline to the container and cause a massive explosion.

Use appropriate materials to start and stoke a fire. The only approved method for using liquid fuel to start or stoke a fire involves the use of a drip torch with a diesel-gasoline mixture ratio of 3 to 1 or 4 to 1. Gasoline by itself is too volatile to start or stoke fires. There are also materials you can use that are designed

specifically for starting fires in the woods. These can be mixtures of sawdust and wax or solid fuel gels that will not suddenly accelerate combustion.

Employers should train workers on safe procedures for starting and stoking fires. These include:

- Clear adequate firebreaks around warming fires or use burn barrels
- Never use gasoline to stoke a fire.
- Keep fires small.
- Keep fire extinguishers and fire suppression tools nearby.
- Keep chainsaws and saw fuel at least 10 feet away from open flames.
- Do not engage in horseplay around a fire.
- If your clothing catches on fire, remember to stop, drop and roll; and cover your face with your hands.

For more information on this investigation and related fire-safety links go to:

www.cdc.gov/niosh/face/pdfs/06or001.pdf



Date of safety talk: _____ Leader: _____
Attending: _____