Lessons from Losses

To help TPA members avoid accidents resulting in injury or damage to property, The Timber Bulletin, in association with Lumbermen's Underwriting Alliance, will publish details of actual incidents and what can be done to avoid such occurrences in the future. By sharing this information, TPA and LUA hope to make our industry as safe as possible.

Incident: A track machine with a stroke delimber attachment was destroyed by fire. The machine had about 9000 hours of use recorded on the hour meter, and was basically an excavator that is specialty built for logging. In this situation this equipment did have the logging packet that included excellent side/top/bottom shielding with access doors to all areas of the internal components. The machine was equipped with one 10-pound multi-purpose fire extinguisher and a built-in electrical disconnect (solenoid system) that will disconnect after 20-30 seconds.

On the day of the incident, the weather was warm/dry for this time of year, temperatures in the low 70's, very windy and little rain all spring. It was a day with some clouds but good midday sun and very low humidity.

Just before the fire broke out the operator had shutdown for a midday break and at that time service was completed (grease/check). During this break the operator had lunch (in machine), greased and checked machine over for possible problems or maintenance needs. When the operator tried to start-up the machine would not respond. He tried numerous times with no starter noise heard, however the dashboard lights, radio, etc. all worked. Approximately 3-4 minutes had elapsed from the time the operated initially tried to start-up. The key was shut off and he was checking fuses in the cab when the skidder operator raced up to this machine and said to shutdown for there was a fire on the back side opposite the cab (blind side). There was a strong wind blowing from the operator side over the machine so the operator could not see smoke. The loader/slasher was approximately 75 yards away and immediately responded with his extinguisher. The machine operator involved in the fire used his extinguisher with the fire bouncing back almost immediately. By then 911 was called, the owner and the skidder operator both responded with their 10-pound fire extiuishers, one from both sides, but the fire could not be stopped. Very black smoke occurred from the beginning of the fire and appeared to have started in the rear area of the engine compartment spreading quickly to the center of the machine (in the direction of the battery compartment). After the three extinguishers were exhausted

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the three individuals on this site switched from fighting the equipment fire to controlling the spread of fire to the forest. By using two skidders the wood material in the area could be pulled away reducing the risk of fire spread. No injuries occurred.

911 being called initially, the local fire department (forestry) responded in approximately 25 minutes and extinguished the fire. However, the machine was destroyed.

The operator has 20 years logging experience working for this company. He has a good work ethic and considered fully trained in equipment operation and woods work. The machine was well-maintained.

It is uncertain as to what failed. The most logical cause would probable be a starter problem that created a direct electrical short. The overheated electrical wiring may have burned into a hydraulic or fuel line which would cause a fast-moving and hot fire. Also, in review of the burned machine it was noted that the covering on the electrical cables from the battery to the starter area were completely burned but other items in the battery compartment were not completely burned. This leads to the belief the electrical wiring was very hot (possible electrical short). This machine did have an automatic electrical disconnect but this may have failed when the electrical melted down. In the panic of this fire situation the manual disconnect was not shut off.

LUA-suggested preventive measures include:

1. Complete refresher employee training for proper operation, service, emergency response, etc. for new and existing employees. Weekly tool box safety meetings work well in reviewing all equipment. Cross training all employees is very beneficial.
2. Always shut down the electrical disconnect (master switch) on your mobile equipment during shutdown, during maintenance and in an emergency situation. Refresher training for all employees and temporary operators needs to be reviewed regularly.

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continuous supply of timber to the public in accordance with Forest Service authorizing legislation."

This finding does not apply to (1) contracts that have been or are currently eligible to be extended under market related contract term addition (MRCTA) contract provisions, except sales using the Hardwood Lumber index that were awarded after Dec. 31, 2005; (2) salvage sale contracts that were sold with the objective of harvesting deteriorating timber; (3) contracts the Forest Service determines are in urgent need of harvesting due to deteriorating timber conditions that have developed following award of the contract; or (4) contracts that are in breach.

To receive an extension, purchasers must make a written request to the appropriate contracting officer. Purchasers also must agree to release the Forest Service from all claims and liability if a contract extended pursuant to the Nov. 2, 2007, finding is suspended, modified, or terminated in the future.

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3. Practice fire extinguisher use and discuss the dos and don'ts when using this fire protection. Discussing this topic in a hands-on manner will help in preparedness in an emergency situation.
4. Electrical components need to be of good quality and installed properly. Utilizing manufacturing dealer's maintenance staff may alleviate some problems.
5. Install an on-board fixed self-suppression system on all mobile equipment. Additional protection is always very beneficial in a fire emergency situation. Always following the owner's manual maintenance required for regular maintenance and self-inspection is crucial to the performance of this protection.