



SAFETY DIRECTOR BULLETIN



TREE RISK AWARENESS & BEST PRACTICES

Recent tragic tree-related events in New Jersey highlight the need for awareness of tree risks including the New Jersey Transit Conductor fatal accident and a 12-year-old boy fatally struck by a tree while playing his backyard. While trees provide numerous benefits, they also pose risks, and it's impossible to maintain them free of risk. Factors such as gravity, lean, wind, snow, ice, pest infestation, disease, structural defects, and tree species can all affect a tree's strength.

Assessments

- **Assessing Hazardous Trees:** It's essential to maintain situational awareness and assess potentially hazardous trees within your jurisdiction. Hazardous trees that pose an obvious risk to people, property, or activities should be addressed. Any dead tree or live tree with dead or hanging branches, large cracks or cavities, significant decay, or roots lifting out of the ground should be a priority in areas where they could impact a target.

Priority Areas for Assessment: Playgrounds, ball fields, parking areas, and buildings are essential places to begin assessing, but scrutiny should not be limited to those areas alone. The Emerald Ash Borer infestation has left New Jersey with millions of dead White Ash trees, many in frequent or high occupancy areas on public properties.

- **Duty of Care and Standard of Care:** Public entities have a Duty of Care to ensure a reasonable degree of safety for people or property under their care. The Standard of Care is the degree of care that should reasonably be exercised in similar circumstances.
- **Periodic Assessments and Actions:** Awareness of potentially dangerous trees in your jurisdiction is crucial. Making periodic assessments and taking appropriate action when a hazardous tree is identified is imperative. Assessments should be done after significant weather events, and more regularly if you have a substantial number of trees in frequent or high occupancy areas on public property.
- **Professional Assessment:** If a potentially hazardous tree is identified and requires a higher level of assessment, contact a tree risk assessment professional or a licensed tree care operator.

How to Identify Hazardous Trees

To identify a hazardous tree, you should look for the following signs:

- **Dead or Hanging Branches:** Any dead tree or live tree with dead or hanging branches should be a priority in areas where they could impact a target.
- **Large Cracks:** Trees with large cracks in their trunks or branches are at risk of failure.
- **Roots Lifting Out of the Ground:** Trees with roots lifting out of the ground indicate instability and should be assessed.
- **Leaning Trees:** Trees that are leaning significantly may be at risk of falling.
- **Pest Infestation and Disease:** Trees affected by pest infestation or disease may have weakened structures.
- **Structural Defects:** Look for structural defects such as cavities, decay, or weak branch unions.
- **Environmental Factors:** Consider environmental factors such as gravity, wind, snow, and ice that can affect the strength of a tree.

The [OSHA Fact Sheet: Tree Trimming Safety](#) provides guidance on identifying hazardous trees:

- **Broken or Hanging Branches:** Be cautious of broken or hanging branches, attached vines, or a dead tree that is leaning. These hazards can cause injuries.
- **Pressure Points:** If the tree is broken and under pressure, make sure you know which way the pressure is going. If unsure, make small cuts to release some of the pressure before cutting up the section.
- **Young Trees Under Pressure:** Be careful of young trees that other trees have fallen against. They act like spring poles and can propel back.
- **Lodged Trees:** A tree may not have fallen completely to the ground and be lodged against another tree. Extreme care must be taken to safely bring the trees to the ground.