

Worker Fatality Alert

February 2014

Tree Trimmers Suffocated by Palm Fronds

Key Prevention Point

- Palm tree frond removal should only be performed or supervised by a certified tree worker

The **California Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (CA FACE)** program tracks and investigates cases of fatal injuries at work, and makes prevention recommendations for employers and workers. The CA/FACE program has investigated the deaths of three workers who died between 2010 and 2012 while trimming palm trees in Southern California.



What happened? Three tree trimmers suffocated under the weight of collapsing palm fronds. In all three cases, the workers climbed up the tree and trimmed the fronds from the bottom up, placing themselves directly beneath the fronds. Neither the workers nor the supervisors were certified tree workers. They did not follow proper safety procedures or use the correct equipment. The workers were pinned by thick layers of dead fronds and suffocated to death.

What was the cause? When a tree trimmer cuts or pulls on dead fronds, adjacent fronds or an entire ring of fronds may collapse and encase the worker. The weight of the fronds causes pressure on the worker's chest and suffocation.

Why is this important now? There are over 45,000 palm trees in California. Many are mature trees that are tall and have many years of frond growth. There are thousands of tree workers who trim palm trees and are at risk.

What should be done to prevent this from happening again?

- Only workers certified by organizations such as the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) or the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) should perform or supervise palm tree trimming.
- Proper work procedures and correct equipment should be used. Fronds should be removed by workers using an aerial device and wearing fall protection. Alternatively, workers may use climbing procedures that place them above the fronds*.
- Homeowners should hire tree trimming companies that have a current tree service contractor's license (California State Contractors Licensing Board D49). Under certain circumstances, homeowners may be liable for worker injuries or deaths that occur on their property if they hire unlicensed tree trimmers.

*For more information see p. 8 of [TCIA Magazine](#) (PDF) Vol. XXIV, No. 6.
(http://www.tcia.org/TCI-publications/tci-magazine/2013/06/TCI_Mag_June_2013_Digimag.pdf)

CA FACE palm tree investigations are available at the [FACE website](#): <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/FACEReports>



The [Occupational Health Branch](#) in the California Department of Public Health is devoted to improving worker health and safety through prevention activities.

See www.cdph.ca.gov/ohb