

Clearing a Path for Access After a Tornado

Volunteers with chainsaws can quickly restore access after a tornado. However, a fatal mistake can occur if you're too hasty. Felling trees, as well as operating a chainsaw, are dangerous enough that special precautions are important. Both falling trees and chain saws may become lethal if caution isn't used.

1. Avoid areas where electric power lines could electrocute a volunteer if the falling tree or severed limbs don't drop where one expects. Call the electric utility to disconnect power before beginning to cut in those areas.
2. If it is windy, attempt to find another way to reach your destination. Felling a tree in the wind requires an experienced woodsman and adds more danger. Careful preparations are necessary to avoid becoming a victim of a falling tree or from losing control of your saw.
3. Choose cuts to be efficient in clearing the path. Avoid making cuts above waist level, if it can be done without adding three or four extra cuts. Reduce fatigue by taking brief rests. Inform others about your plans, including that you're going back to cutting. After fatigue sets in from prolonged rescue or chain saw work, following these procedures is more critical because your judgment is no longer as attentive or sharp.
4. Determine your escape route from a falling tree before you begin your cut. If your path isn't clear 45 degrees from the line where you expect the tree to fall, clear the escape route first.
5. Examine the entire surface where you expect to cut. Avoid cutting through where the tree has "grown around" a wire or fence, etc. Chainsaw kick-backs often are caused by striking an object, especially with the tip of the blade. Kickbacks may cause severe lacerations, often with profuse bleeding. Take special precautions to avoid injury because access to medical care may be delayed considerably due to the destruction and injuries from storm damage.
6. Select your cuts so that the severed portion drops away without pinching the saw blade. Make certain your footing is firm and you are in a balanced position. Stand slightly off to one side of the saw to protect your body from a sudden "kick-back".
7. Fell trees away from other obstructions. If a tree falls onto another standing tree, the danger is much greater that the saw operator will be struck by one of the falling trees when the final cut is made.
8. While bucking, or cutting, the felled tree into manageable lengths, guard against unexpected log rolling. Block the log from rolling to avoid dangerous hazards including sudden saw shift or saw kickback. Experienced woodsmen work on the uphill side of the log after it has been chocked.

Chain Saw Safety, University of Arkansas Extension fact sheet FSA-1009, has additional pointers for successful cutting. Obtain a copy to review for your preparation before beginning to clear trees damaged by the storm.