Tree Trimming Fatality File

Tree trimming deaths alarm federal officials and industry insiders

In December, 19-year-old Mason Scott Cox died in North Carolina after he was caught and pulled into a wood chipper. It was his first day on the job.

Grounds maintenance workers, including tree trimmers, have a fatality rate that is more than three times that of the average worker in the U.S., according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Yet there are no federal safety standards for tree trimming, pruning and removal. The International Society of Arboriculture promotes voluntary standards, but not all contractors use them. Even some industry insiders are alarmed.

“We think a patchwork of standards are being applied to us,” said Peter Gerstenberger, a senior advisor for safety compliance and standards for the Tree Care Industry Association, which represents about 2,300 companies. “We really need a separate standard that fits the dangers of our industry better.”

About 580 people died in tree trimming accidents from 2009 through 2015, according to figures from the Tree Care Industry Association.

In 1995, OSHA enacted safety standards for the logging industry, and then tried to extend them to tree care. But the tree trimming industry fought back, arguing that the logging rules overreached and did not address its unique hazards.

Gerstenberger’s group asked OSHA to consider a safety standard specific to tree care operations in 2006. Two years later, OSHA appeared poised to begin that process only to shelve it a year later for lack of resources, he said.

Now, federal safety officials are rekindling that effort, with the

announcement last fall that OSHA would gather information for the possible development of specific rules for the industry.

“Due to the high numbers of fatalities in this industry, OSHA has decided that a dedicated standard is necessary,” Amanda McClure, an agency spokeswoman, wrote in an email.

Gerstenberger says there are obvious areas for improvement. For example, federal OSHA lacks rules that regulate how workers can safely trim trees if they are standing on a ladder. In addition, unlike the industry’s voluntary standards, there are no federal OSHA rules that specify how workers should safely feed brush into mobile wood chippers to avoid injury.