

Chainsaw Safety Certification and the Maine Appalachian Trail Club

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Update:

In view of the significant liabilities associated with operating a chainsaw on the Appalachian Trail in Maine without training and certification, the five Trail Overseers agreed to the following protocol at their November 9, 2011 Annual Meeting:

- If a Trail Maintainer indicates that they use or intend to use a chainsaw on their trail section, and
- If a Trail Maintainer indicates that they do not plan to enroll in the chainsaw safety training program,
- Then the Trail Overseer will need to ask this Trail Maintainer to resign from their trail section.

Background:

Chainsaw safety training along with required certifications and re-certifications was introduced to the MATC in the spring of 2003 when the Appalachian Trail Conservancy entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Park Service and the U. S. Forest Service to “Provide chain saw and crosscut saw operator training, certification, and recertification opportunities using Conference-affiliate Instructor/Certifiers and Instructors to meet the needs of Appalachian Trail workers to the fullest extent possible, and especially to meet the needs of Trail Clubs on National Park Service – Appalachian Trail Park Office lands, and other non-Forest Service lands.”

This agreement primarily addressed trail clubs north of Virginia. National Forests along the Southern half of the AT had been requiring chainsaw training and certification for many years where the AT was located within the Forests. Chainsaw training has been available and encouraged in Maine since 1998.

Although there did not seem to be any challenge to the value and desirability of chainsaw safety training, several AT club members felt that they were informed of the MOU after the fact and would have preferred to have been offered a more active role in the process. Questions were raised regarding the requirements of certification and recertification.

The first training session was held in Bradford, ME in April of 2004. It was a full class with two instructors and nearly 20 students. It was followed by another class in October of 2004, and the schedule of April and October classes has been repeated ever since.

Further reinforcement of the need for chainsaw safety training and certification was offered in a letter from Pamela Underhill, Park Manager to MATC President Milt Wright on May 3, 2007. “In addition to my own personal concern for worker and public safety, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has specific requirements for “employers” of workers using chain saws, which apply to both volunteers and paid employees. . . . This program incorporates the OSHA requirements and the concept of best industry practices. . . .”

MATC Executive Committee voted on January 12, 2008 to require all MATC Trail Maintainers and other AT workers to comply with the National Park Service/Appalachian Trail Conservancy Skills/Training and Trail Crew Worker Safety Policy regarding training and certification. That policy requires anyone operating a chainsaw (or crosscut saw) on the AT to have received training and to have been certified for such operation. The operator must hold current First Aid/CPR credentials. Recertification is required every three years. **Note that this applies to all landowners in Maine, not just NPS.**

A one day recertification option was introduced in the spring of 2009.

Dave Field summarized additional concerns of the MATC within this letter of transmittal to ATC.

- Most of our personal health insurance policies have a clause that says that they will not cover injury that is insured by workers compensation. The NPS Volunteers in Parks (VIP) includes just that.
- A smart lawyer will say to a Trail worker who rejects VIP coverage, "You chose to reject this coverage, so we (your personal insurance) won't cover you either."
- In the case of tort claim, also covered by VIP, the Trail Worker, Trail Overseer, MATC president, Executive Committee, the AT, and the NPS could all end up in court.
- Suppose the case involves felling a tree, and the volunteer is not certified under the NPS/ATC program. The lawyers for the injured (or dead) hiker will have a field day.
- In addition to basic concern for the safety of all AT workers in Maine, the Executive Committee feels that the Maine Appalachian Trail Club simply cannot afford this risk exposure.

What are the benefits of Chainsaw Safety Training?

- Safe chainsaw techniques have evolved tremendously in the last 30 years. A man named Soren Erickson came from Sweden to the U.S. in the 1970s and found that the chainsaw accident rate in this country was 10 times what it was in his home country. Erickson began training best practices from Sweden's wood worker licensing program to the point that OSHA and many other industrial safety agencies began including his techniques in their standards. Today, these methods are incorporated in the Game of Logging, Certified Logging Professional, MEMIC chainsaw safety standards and ATC chainsaw trainings.
- It's a social event. You will get to spend a weekend with your fellow trail maintainers. There is plenty of time to visit between training topics.
- It's fun. Most of the time is in the woods, and you will get to see new techniques for common problems.
- Everyone learns something new and helpful. It is time well spent.
- Many people learn easier ways of doing things with their chainsaw.
- Statistics show that chainsaws are responsible for more injuries than all other power tools combined. It makes sense to dedicate a day or two to best safety practices every few years.

Chainsaw Safety Training has had a complex evolution over the past two decades. The National Park Service is required to provide chainsaw safety training to its employees and volunteers via OSHA standards. When ATC signed onto the MOU that required Clubs to participate in the training program, MATC leadership did not feel fully included in the communications, but recognized the need for participation.

The training program has been in place for 8 years, and over 100 people have joined the classes. Invariably people have a good time and learn good things. If you haven't been with us yet – watch for announcements on the MATC website for chainsaw safety training offered in Mid April and early October of 2012.