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TECHNICAL RELEASE

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USING GPS COORDINATES FOR HELICOPTER RESCUES

Safety: global positioning systems

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INTRODUCTION: Harvesting operations are often in remote, difficult-to-access locations. Accidents occurring on such sites can be serious enough to necessitate emergency personnel coming to the job site. There are times when the accident victim is either located in a place an ambulance can not reach, or is in bad enough shape that the decision is made to call a helicopter rescue ambulance. In either case first responders must be able to describe to the dispatcher where the job site is located. Complex directions to the job site can be simplified during a helicopter rescue by providing GPS Coordinates.

GENERAL FEATURES: Global Positioning System (commonly referred to as GPS) receivers are small field units surveyors or foresters use, which reference satellites to map or locate sites or features on the ground. Recreational use of such units helps people find a favorite fishing spot, or the location a deer stand. Likewise, a helicopter pilot may use these coordinates to come directly to a job site.

OPERATION: Hand held, battery operated GPS units provide a set of coordinates, often in the form of either latitude/longitude or decimal/degree. Either set of these numbers will get the helicopter close enough to the job site. For example, the latitude and longitude coordinates for Chattanooga, Tennessee are: 35 degrees-2 minutes North / 85 degrees-12 minutes West. To pinpoint a location more precisely would require "seconds" in addition to degrees and minutes. Most of today's GPS units are capable of determining a given position with adequate accuracy.

If timber harvesting professionals do not have their own GPS unit, they more than likely know someone who does own one. Most large forest products company foresters and consulting foresters are using these units now. Harvesting professionals should locate a GPS unit, obtain the job site coordinates, write them down and then, most importantly, train the crew. This important job site location information is only useful if the person who knows the GPS coordinates shares this information with those on the job site.

APPLICATION: Loggers should use this Technical Release as a resource for a harvesting crew safety meeting before beginning operations at any new site. The meeting should inform all crew members of the emergency phone number, explain to them what the site's GPS coordinates are and what they mean, and establish a readily accessible location to store the phone number and coordinates.

COMMENT: FRA Technical Release 91-R-15 reviewed the importance of being able to guide emergency crews to a job site. The addition of GPS coordinates to a safety program could be considered an update of a complete safety program. Although we often bemoan "progress" and how complicated things have gotten, this particular technical advance, GPS, is one that can save a life.

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