

Felled tree contacts LV electric line

Vegetation Management Work

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Safety alert

Background

Late last year vegetation management workers were removing a nature strip tree on behalf of a municipal council. The whole tree was being removed due to its poor health and condition. The work was being performed at ground level.

The chainsaw operator was using the quarter cut felling method to remove the tree; a common tree felling technique that enables the direction of the tree being felled to be controlled if performed correctly. As the tree was being cut it fell in an unintended direction and impacted the adjacent uninsulated low voltage (LV) electric line. This caused the LV conductors to then fall to the ground.

This created an unsafe electrical situation that had the potential to cause property damage, serious personal injury or in the worst circumstance an electrocution. Fortunately, no one was injured.

The incident was reported to the municipal council by the distribution business and to Energy Safe Victoria (ESV).

Investigation Findings

ESV conducted an investigation of this incident and found:

- The chainsaw operator did not hold current training to work as a qualified person conducting vegetation management work
- The crew failed to complete a site risk assessment prior to commencing the work
- The crew failed to identify the potentially compromised structural integrity of the tree as a site hazard that may have affected the controlled felling of the tree
- The crew failed to identify the tree height with regard to the proximity of the powerline as a site hazard
- The crew did not identify and outline control measures to ensure the work could be completed safely.

ESV's view is that the combination of these failures resulted in a breach of Electricity Safety legislation; heavy penalties may be applied to such breaches.

Key Lessons

- Ensure all site hazards are identified and actions to control the hazards are implemented
- Ensure all personnel are qualified and suitably experienced for the tasks being undertaken
- Always maintain appropriate SADs when undertaking works in the vicinity of live electrical apparatus
- Regularly reassess each worksite for hazards when completing electric line clearance work

Important information

- Failing to identify hazards at the work site will place workers at risk of serious personal injury or in the worst circumstance, electrocution
- Ensure each individual work site is assessed for hazards and controls are implemented to manage risks
- When a qualified vegetation management worker is completing vegetation management works on behalf of a municipal council they must comply with the ESV Electrical Safety Rules for vegetation management work near overhead powerlines by non-electrical workers.
- Working near live high and low voltage electric lines is equally dangerous. A vegetation management worker was electrocuted in February 2019 when they made contact with uninsulated low voltage electric lines.

Enforcement outcomes

Having completed its investigation of this incident it is ESV's view that the minimum clearances from the electric line, as required by the Electricity Safety (General) Regulations 2019, were not maintained. Failing to maintain the minimum clearance is a breach of the regulations.

- ESV's view is that the chainsaw operator failed to ensure the tree he was felling maintained the required clearance from the electric line, which is a breach of Electricity Safety (General) Regulations
- The distribution business was issued a warning for failing to report the incident to ESV as required by the Electrical Safety Rules, which is a breach of Electricity Safety (General) regulation

ESV may choose to prosecute or take other enforcement action where it considers a breach of the Electricity Safety Act 1998 or Electricity Safety Regulations has occurred.

Who we are

We are Victoria's independent safety regulator for electricity, gas and pipelines.

Our role is to ensure that Victorian gas and electricity industries are safe and meet community expectations. We are also responsible for licensing and registering electricians, and educating the community about energy safety.

More information is available on the Energy Safe Victoria website: www.esv.vic.gov.au