

When off-duty firefighters in the village of Castine Hill cut down 40 large trees in November during a culling in the forest on the outskirts of town, Fire Chief Korey Spratt said the firefighters could take the wood, and Spratt took some as well. But the State Ethics Commission reprimanded Spratt and the firefighters, saying they should have known they could not take the wood for personal use.

"Every public official in the state is required to adhere to ethics laws," said Bev Mills, executive director of the Commission. "No public official or employee can gain financially as a result of their position outside of their approved salary. In this case, the firefighters and Chief Spratt helped themselves to wood that had a potential resale value and is a supply not available to the general public."

Chief Spratt and the firefighters involved would have gotten away with taking the wood if not for Zander Dees, a retired firefighter. Dees saw the wood stacked so high against the chief's house it went up to the roof. Dees overheard a few firefighters at the local watering hole talking about how they were set for "fuel for their fireplaces for the entire winter." Dees didn't think it was fair that those involved were getting the valuable resource for free—especially as some families in town were desperate for firewood and couldn't afford to buy in large quantities.

Although the chief and the firefighters would normally face a fine and a written warning would be placed in their personnel file, the Ethics Commission imposed an additional sanction. The firewood would be confiscated and given to a local charity that would distribute the wood to those in need. The entire situation became a hot-button topic in town with some thinking the firefighters did nothing wrong while others feeling that it was wrong and could be seen as theft.

Chief Spratt said the whole episode "was an innocent mistake as it was unclear what was to be done with the cut down trees."

Questions for discussion:

Does it matter that the firefighters were off duty when they did the work?

Was Zander Dees right to report the incident, or should Dees have minded their own business?

What do you think of the Ethics Commission's decision in the case?

Are public employees unethical if they use public resources for personal use?