

Jury awards avocado picker \$21 million

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A free-lance avocado picker whose arms needed to be amputated after a 1998 power-line accident received a \$21 million jury award Friday after Southern California Edison was found primarily at fault. The jury found that SoCal Edison was 80 percent responsible for injuries Allen Kimball suffered in May 1998, when his aluminum fruit-picking pole touched a 12,000-volt power line in a Hacienda Heights neighborhood. Kimball's left arm was amputated just below the elbow, his right arm was amputated below the shoulder and his right leg suffered severe injuries. Kimball, who was standing on a metal ladder when the accident occurred, sued Edison in 1999, claiming the utility failed to properly trim the avocado tree and left hidden power lines hanging above it. Kimball, 33, worked as free-lance avocado picker while in college to earn extra money, said his attorney, Christine Spagnoli. Spagnoli told jurors before they reached their verdict that Kimball was partially responsible for the accident, but argued that it was Edison's responsibility to keep the lines clear. "From the very beginning this has been about shared responsibility," Spagnoli said. "We're grateful that the jury found responsibility on Edison and his part and not a one-way obligation." Edison attorney Friedrich Seitz told jurors at the end of the four-week trial that Edison should not be held responsible for someone who used an aluminum pole and metal ladder near a power line. Edison officials said the utility was disappointed by the verdict and will consider its legal options.