Helicopter crash on Shasta-Trinity National Forest


Forest Service officials first learned of the accident at approximately 7:45 p.m.

Four fire personnel were transported to Mercy Medical Center Redding and are listed in critical condition. Officials still have not confirmed the number of persons on board the helicopter. There are no known fatalities at this time.

A U.S. Forest Service Accident Investigation Team will be ordered tomorrow.

The Forest Service will hold a press conference tomorrow at 10 a.m. at the USDA Service Center, 3644 Avtech Parkway, Redding, Calif.
Four critical after firefighting helicopter crashes

By Christine Vovakes - Bee Correspondent
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JUNCTION CITY, TRINITY COUNTY -- Four fire personnel were in critical condition after a helicopter assigned to the Iron Complex in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest crashed Tuesday evening at the north end of the Buckhorn Fire about 15 miles northwest of Junction City, a spokesman said.

Officials first learned of the accident at 7:45 p.m. They have not confirmed the number of fire personnel aboard the huge Sikorsky S-61 military-style helicopter when it went down in rugged, remote terrain. It was being used as a fire transport helicopter, spokesman Mike Odle said.

Four fire personnel initially were taken to Mercy Medical Center in Redding and were listed in critical condition Tuesday night.

Two of the crash victims have been transferred to the UC Davis Regional Burn Center, Odle said.

A U.S. Forest Service Accident Investigation Team will be on scene today. More information will be released at a press conference scheduled this morning at the USDA Service Center in Redding.

Junction City is on Highway 299W, approximately 9 miles west of Weaverville.

Watch www.sacbee.com for updates.
Crashed helicopter's liftoff was 'slower than normal'
Federal officials reveal more about the disaster, including IDs on the other two victims

Saturday, August 09, 2008

JOSEPH ROSE, STUART TOMLINSON and KIMBERLY A.C. WILSON

The Oregonian Staff

REDDING, Calif. - The Sikorsky S-61 helicopter that crashed while shuttling Oregon firefighters from a California mountaintop this week reportedly lifted off "slower than normal" before striking trees with its nose and rotor, investigators said Friday.

Witnesses to Tuesday's air disaster, which killed nine people on the front lines of an 83,000-acre wildfire in the Trinity-Shasta National Forest, told National Transportation Safety Board investigators that the aircraft rose only 40 to 50 feet before going down.

After crashing about 150 yards from the helipad, "the helicopter quickly filled with very dense, thick black smoke," said Kitty Higgins, an agency board member.

She said initial reports from Carson Helicopters in Grants Pass that the aircraft rolled 1,000 feet down an embankment after crashing turned out not to be true. Carson officials, who described the accident as taking place at the edge of a 6,000-foot ridge, weren't available Friday to comment.

Though the cause might not be known for weeks, an attorney who has criticized the helicopter manufacturer says the circumstances are eerily similar to four other crashes that killed or seriously injured West Coast logging pilots flying Sikorsky S-61 helicopters in recent years.

In all four cases, the helicopters crashed as they were lifting off, caused by a failure of a clutch mechanism that connects engines to the helicopter's five main rotors, attorneys for the pilots and their families argued in courts in Oregon, Tennessee and British Columbia.

"The pattern in this week's crash is the same," said San Francisco attorney Gerald Stems, who filed two of the lawsuits against Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation, "but, of course, we don't know yet if that was the cause."

The latest crash killed nine people, including seven firefighters from Oregon, a pilot from Lostine and a U.S. Forest Service official. Four men were hospitalized, however, Rick Schroeder was released from the Mercy Medical Center in Redding around 5 p.m. Friday, said U.S. Forest Service spokesman Roland Giller. On Friday, the final two victims were identified.

Grayback Forestry Inc., which is based in Merlin and employed all the dead firefighters, released the name of Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, of Cave Junction,
once his family had been notified. The Forest Service also identified James N. Ramage of Redding as their on-board representative.

Safety inspector

A veteran who had seen a lot of wildfires, Ramage was riding along to assure the flights were adhering to safety guidelines, his supervisor said Friday. He was the "check airman" aboard the helicopter as it shuttled people from one fire camp to another in the rugged area.

"He was on board to check the run, the pilot, the whole mission," said Dennis Hulbert, a Forest Service regional aviation officer.

Renno was part of the second half of a 20-man Grayback Forestry crew to head out from the helipad Tuesday evening.

Outside Grayback's White City office Friday, company president Michael Wheelock, 54, addressed two somber crews of firefighters returning from Northern California.

Dressed in green ripstop workpants, dusty boots and gray company T-shirts and caps, the men listened quietly as Wheelock, a former smoke jumper, told them it was OK to cry.

"Some are angry, some may be sad and break down. Some may not feel anything. They may be numb, and it's OK," Wheelock said afterward. "I'm proud of these firefighters. They're brave, safe, professional and well-trained."

Ed Floate, 61, a longtime Grayback recruiter and trainer, said he was in another remote area with a crew of firefighters when he learned Wednesday morning that a helicopter had crashed.

"They announced that a helicopter had gone down in a morning briefing," he said. "No details about injuries or whose aircraft it was. At that time, I had a real sick feeling I couldn't get rid of."

The first reports from the crash site, Higgins of the NTSB said, were that everyone aboard the Sikorsky had survived. It would be six more hours before officials knew "the magnitude of the accident," she said.

"We can't really say right now why that might have happened," Higgins said of the delay, pointing out that the crash happened just before dark in a remote area with sketchy communications. "It could just be there was a lot of confusion."

Recorder found

An investigation team will examine two engines, the drive shaft and transmission of the helicopter, she said. The voice recorder has been recovered in better shape than expected, but investigators don't know how much useful information they will be able to pull from it until they get it in the lab.

Investigators also are looking at maintenance records for the helicopter, which was manufactured in 1964 but has been owned by Carson Helicopters for about a year.
The aircraft had logged more than 35,000 hours of flight time during its working life, but a recently replaced transmission had logged only 23 hours.

Accounts from witnesses to the crash were consistent, Higgins said. The helicopter "lifted up more slowly and moved forward more slowly" than normal, she said.

After the nose of the helicopter apparently struck a tree, the rotor struck several trees, she said. The aircraft came to rest on its left side and quickly filled with smoke, according to witnesses.

"Obviously," Higgins said, "a helicopter has to gain a certain amount of height and then move forward. It seemed to be slower than it normally was. What that means, why that might have happened, we're still putting those pieces together."

Stems, the San Francisco attorney who has fought Sikorsky in court after the deaths of four pilots since 2002, said investigators should look hard at one part of the helicopter in particular.

He said research for the cases showed the maximum strain on the Sikorsky helicopters is when it lifts off. "That's exactly when it happens to be lifting its maximum deadweight" and the clutch assembly is prone to fail, he said.

In at least four cases against Sikorsky - and defendants that included either the engine or transmission manufacturer - the company settled the suits out of court, Stems said.

Stems, who specializes in representing victims of helicopter and airplane crashes, compared the "fairly simple system" that transfers power from the engines to the rotors to the mechanism that connects a household drill to a bit. If the bit loses its connection, it stops spinning.

When that happens and the Sikorsky S-61's engines are not engaged, the pilot can't make a controlled descent during an emergency. "The blades just windmill," Stems said.

Sikorsky could not be reached Friday for comment on the S-61.

Outside the Grayback offices, blame didn't appear on anybody's mind. The ragged fire crew was just hunting.

It was nearly 24 hours after the crash before Grayback veteran Floate learned that his sick feeling about the downed helicopter was right: It was filled with many young men he had hired.

"I'm more like their grandfather than their father," Floate said. "You counsel them, try to nurture them along, encourage them in good directions. The loss is great."

Six years ago, the company rallied after a fatal van crash in Colorado killed five of its employees.

"We all hoped it would never happen again," he said. "Now, this."

Michelle Roberts, Helen Jung and Lynne Palombo of The Oregonian contributed to this report.
9 Presumed Dead in Fire Copter Crash

Wednesday, August 06, 2008

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO —

Nine people are presumed dead in the crash of a helicopter that was carrying firefighters over the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, officials said Wednesday.

The crash happened Tuesday night just after the helicopter picked up firefighters, who had been battling a blaze north of Junction City, from a clearing in a remote, rugged region of the forest, said Jennifer Rabuck, spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service.

The helicopter was carrying 11 firefighters and two crew members when it went down, according to the Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board. Four people were airlifted to hospitals with severe burns, including two in critical condition, according to the Forest Service.

FAA spokesman Ian Gregor said the Sikorsky S-61N chopper was destroyed by fire after crashing "under unknown circumstances." FAA and NTSB investigators were headed to the scene, about 216 miles northwest of Sacramento.

Firefighters who were waiting to be picked up helped rescue the four injured people after the helicopter crashed around 7:30 p.m. and caught fire, Rabuck said. About three dozen firefighters had to spend the night on the mountain because it became too dark for other helicopters to land, she said.

Nine people — a co-pilot and eight firefighters — were still missing in the wreckage and presumably killed. Recovery efforts have been complicated by the crash site's remote location, and the wreckage is still burning, Rabuck said.

"It's difficult to access," she said. "It's very remote, very steep and heavily forested."

Three of the injured were at the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento on Wednesday; two were in critical condition, and one was in serious condition, officials said. The fourth was in Mercy Medical Center in Redding in serious condition.
The firefighters had been working at the north end of a more than 27-square-mile fire burning in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, part of a larger complex of blazes that total 135 square miles. The complex was about 87 percent contained.

Some of the firefighters, including those in the hospital, were employed by firefighting contractor Grayback Forestry, based in Merlin, Ore.

Mike Whealock, founder and owner of Grayback Forestry, said he was in Sacramento handling notification of families of his employees. He would not confirm any deaths.

The helicopter was owned and operated by Carson Helicopters Inc., a Pennsylvania company whose firefighting operations are based in Grants Pass, Ore. All 12 of the company's helicopters are being used for firefighting in Oregon and California, said Bob Madden, Carson's director of corporate affairs.

Madden said the helicopter's two co-pilots were Carson employees — one was hospitalized and the other was among the missing. The company would not release their names until officials confirmed their identities and notified family members.

"We are praying for the swift recovery of all the victims, and our hearts go out to their loved ones," Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said Wednesday.

Before Tuesday's crash, three firefighters had been killed while on duty in California this year, including one firefighter also assigned to battle the Shasta-Trinity blazes who was killed late last month by a falling tree.

On July 2, a volunteer firefighter in Mendocino County died of heart attack on the fire line. Another firefighter from Washington state was killed July 26 in Siskiyou County when he was burned while scouting a fire.