Station Fire Aircraft and Crew Protocols

8/26/09 Discussion at the Incident Command Post

Battalion Chief Robert Garcia recalls a discussion taking place between approximately 8:30pm to 10pm with the Station Fire Incident Commander Wil Spyrison, FS Battalion Chief Mark Aguirre, and LA County Battalion Chief Scott Hale at the Incident Command Post on CCC Ridge.

This discussion focused on whether or not to order night flying helicopter support from Los Angeles County Fire Department and whether or not night flight would be beneficial through the evening hours on 08/26/09 and early morning on 08/27/09.

Based on the current fire conditions at the time, all parties present felt that reordering a helicopter to replace LA County Helicopter 14 to provide night water drops for mop-up support purposes would not have been a good use of the aircraft considering risk versus gain. LA County Helicopter 14 had been ordered by the Incident Commander at 5:26pm that evening to support mop-up, and was ordered released by LA County at 6:01pm for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) coverage. It is standard procedure whenever ordering an aircraft to weigh the benefits versus the risk before placing the order. In this case the risk was the exposure of the aircraft and pilot to night flying versus the potential benefit of additional water drops. In addition, Battalion Chief Scott Hale advised the group that due to pilot shortage and the EMS responsibilities of Los Angeles County Fire Department, he did not believe any night flying aircraft would be available to the Station Fire.

Aircraft and crews assigned to the Station Fire on 8/26/09 were released after the completion of their last flight assignment by Air Attack and the Station Fire Incident Commander. They were told they were tentatively reassigned to the Morris Fire for the morning of 8/27/09. According to flight logs, the crews for air tankers 11 and 45, which were assigned to the Station fire on 8/26/09, went off duty at 8pm that night.

The Morris Fire Air Operation Officer gave a duty start time for all aircraft assigned to the Morris Fire to be on duty 7am on the morning of 8/27/09. All aircraft crews assigned to Fox Field were released and transported to their hotels with instructions to be prepared for pick up in the morning so they could be at Fox Field for duty at 7am.

8/27/09 at Fox Field Air Tanker Base

On the morning of 8/27/09 at approximately 12:55am, an order was placed by the Station Fire Incident Commander for 1 air attack, 1 lead plane and 3 any type air tanker. The air tankers assigned to fill this order were scheduled to be aircraft assigned to the Morris fire and stationed at Fox Field. The Station fire was relying on aircraft assigned to the Morris fire to fill their early morning orders due to a shortage of other available aircraft in the area at that time.
Per the National Air Tanker Contract, pilots and air crews are required to have 10 hours of uninterrupted rest immediately prior to beginning a new duty day. (reference section C - paragraph 4 below). Air crew duty includes flight time, ground duty time of any kind, and standby or alert status at any location. (reference section c – paragraph 5 below). In order to meet this requirement and have air crews on duty at 7am it was necessary to refrain from calling the air crews during the night of 8/27/09. A phone call during the early morning hours would have interrupted the mandatory 10 hour off duty time period, placing the crews in a duty status with 1 hour of compensable time. This would have delayed the crews report time to Fox Field from 7am to 8am. In addition, each aircraft is limited to 10 hours of flight time in a 24 hour duty day.

(National Air Tanker Contract)

Exclusive Use Fixed-Wing Airtanker Services

U.S. Forest Service, National Office

SECTION C – DESCRIPTION/SPECIFICATIONS/WORK STATEMENT

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

3. Pilots accumulating 36 or more flight hours in any 6-consecutive duty-days shall be off duty the next day. Flight time shall not exceed a total of 42-hours in any 6-consecutive days. After any 1-full off-duty day, pilots begin a new 6-consecutive day duty-period for the purposes of this clause, providing during any 14-consecutive day period, each pilot shall have 2 full days off-duty. Days off need not be consecutive.

4. Assigned duty of any kind shall not exceed 14-hours in any 24-hour period. Within any 24-hour period, pilots shall have a minimum of 10-consecutive hours off-duty immediately prior to the beginning of any duty day. Local travel up to a maximum of 30-minutes each way between the work site and place of lodging shall not be considered duty time. When one-way travel exceeds 30-minutes, the total travel time shall be considered as part of the duty day.

5. Duty includes flight time, ground duty of any kind, and standby or alert status at any location.

6. During times of prolonged heavy fire activity, the Government may issue a notice reducing the pilot duty day/flight time and/or increasing off-duty days on a geographical or agency-wide basis.

7. Flights point-to-point (airport-to-airport, etc.) with a pilot and co-pilot shall be limited to 10-flight hours per day. (An aircraft that departs “Airport A,” flies reconnaissance on a fire, and then flies to “Airport B,” is not point-to-point).

8. Pilots may be relieved from duty for fatigue or other causes created by unusually strenuous or severe duty before reaching duty limitations.

9. When pilots act as a mechanic, mechanic duties in excess of 2-hours shall apply as flight hours on a one-to one basis toward flight hour limitations.

10. Relief, additional, or substitute pilots reporting for duty under this contract shall furnish a record of all duty and all flight hours during the previous 14-days.