Aerial Firefighters Deploy Assets To Huge, Early Season California Fires

Aerial firefighters went into rapid initial attack mode as two huge wildfires broke out simultaneously across Northern California in late June according to the American Helicopter Service and Aerial Firefighting Association.

WASHINGTON (PRWEB) July 08, 2018 -- Operators of fixed wing air tankers and helicopters are continuing to drop fire retardant and water on the County Fire, which has scorched over 86,000 acres in Yolo and Napa Counties, with containment at 30 percent as of July 5. The smaller, but also destructive Pawnee fire, which exploded across Lake County on Saturday, June 23rd, has burned over 15,000 acres, prompting hundreds of evacuations, and destroying some 22 structures. Containment of that fire currently is 92 percent. Both fires are considered highly unusual in size and intensity this early in the California fire season, which generally hits its stride in mid to late July.

Responding to the fires, operators have put some of their aircraft immediately to work, and repositioned others for quick deployment, if required.

As of July 3, two BAe 146 tankers, flown by Missoula, Montana-headquartered Neptune Aviation Services were stationed in California. One is based at McClellan, outside of Sacramento, and is actively fighting the County Fire, following deployment on the Pawnee Fire. The other is at Merced working on a series of fires throughout central California. The tanker flying out of McClellan is under a CAL FIRE contract, while the other is contracted by the US Forest Service, (USFS). Both are call when needed contracts, according to Ron Hooper, the company’s Chief Executive Officer.

Hooper noted that the tanker at Merced has been operating at that location since it was activated on June 2nd, while the one at McClellan was called up for the Pawnee Fire on June 25. Each aircraft is supported by two pilots and two mechanics.

“At this time, seven of our nine BAe 146 tankers are out on either a USFS call when needed or exclusive use contract, or a CAL FIRE call when needed contract,” said Hooper. “The other two tankers are undergoing maintenance, with one available July 24th, and the other by late August.” He added that between June 20th and July 2nd, over 65 tanker hours were flown in California, alone.

“Forecasters see a significant fire season in the western part of the country—specifically the three West Coast states as well as western Montana,” Hooper said. “The reality is, there will be more fires this year, and the fires will be more intense—at least through September.”

On July 1, one of Helimax Aviation’s CH47D Chinook helicopters was activated under a CAL FIRE call when needed contract for water dropping on the Pawnee Fire, according to Josh Beckham, the Sacramento-headquartered company’s General Manager. The aircraft, he noted, is equipped with a 2,600 gallon Bambi bucket. Upon activation, the twin rotor helicopter was repositioned from its base at McClellan to Middletown, California, along with two pilots, five mechanics and a fuel truck driver for field support.

Beckham reported that Helimax currently has a total of six CH 47Ds. Along with the one on the Pawnee Fire, two are currently working in Utah and New Mexico. “I expect this to be a very busy fire season, and a longer one, especially in California due to the dry conditions,” he said.
During the same period, three S-64 Aircrane Helitanker, operated by Portland, Oregon-headquartered Erickson Inc., have been working on fires throughout California, including one on the Pawnee Fire, under a state call when needed contract. On July 1, one of the S64s was reassigned to the County Fire. That aircraft has subsequently been deployed to the Klamathon Fire, which has destroyed more than 8,000 acres near the Oregon border at Hornbrook.

Andy Mills, the company’s President, Commercial Aviation, explained that all three are equipped with 2,650 gallon-capacity tanks for water or fire retardant dropping. Supported in the field by a crew of five or more—per aircraft—depending on operating conditions and contractual requirements, each helicopter is capable of dropping up to 25,000 gallons per hour, flying multiple sorties.

“We are seeing above average early season activity and were well prepared for an early response,” Mills said. “At Erickson, we are constantly training and innovating to insure we are prepared to serve.”

Other companies have positioned aircraft closer to the fires in anticipation of a call-up. For example, Rick Livingston, President of Intermountain Helicopter in Sonora, California, noted that his single Bell 212HP was moved to Red Bluff under a CAL FIRE call when needed contract, following release from another CAL FIRE assignment.

The helicopter, he explained, is poised for immediate action, supported by a pilot, mechanic, mechanic’s helper and a fuel truck driver. “We have prepared for this since the middle of May, even though a normal fire season—with really large fires—usually begins in mid-July.”

Brian Jorgenson, Vice President, of Timberline Helicopters, Sandpoint, Idaho, reported that he moved a UH-60A Black Hawk helicopter to Sacramento for a possible CAL FIRE assignment. The helicopter, he said, is typically used for water and retardant dropping. Two pilots, a mechanic and fuel truck driver accompanied the aircraft. Jorgenson indicated he expects another active fire season.

“Fire seasons have a way of taking on their own personality. However, based on last season in California it will likely be another busy season,” he said.

Erickson Inc., Helimax Aviation, Intermountain Helicopter, Neptune Aviation Services and Timberline Helicopters are members of the American Helicopter Services and Aerial Firefighting Association (AHSFA), the Washington-based trade association representing the privately operated aerial firefighting industry before federal government agencies tasked with wildland and natural resources management and protection.
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