

NTSB INVESTIGATION UPDATED ON SEAT CRASH IN UTAH

JUNE 23 -- ST. GEORGE, UTAH: The National Transportation Safety Board has updated its information on the investigation into the June 17 crash of an M-18 Dromader airtanker on the Dammeron Complex in southern Utah. Wayne Turner, 58, of Big Sandy, Montana, was killed during firefighting operations on the complex.

The SEAT was under the operational control of the BLM and the NTSB said that aircraft visual meteorological conditions prevailed at the time of the crash. Both ground and airborne eyewitnesses reported that the aircraft had just completed a retardant drop while flying less than 100 feet above downsloping terrain. Immediately after the drop, the aircraft pitched down and descended steeply into wooded terrain. The pilot did not report any problems prior to the accident.

According to BLM representatives, Turner had about 21,000 hours of experience, mostly in crop dusting. He had about 35 hours in the Dromader M-18, of which about 25 hours were flown during simulated and operational firefighting operations during last year's fire season. The pilot also recently had three hours of additional training by the BLM in Safford, Arizona.

The accident flight was the pilot's third or fourth retardant drop of the day; he had completed two drops on the day before the accident. Turner was a relief pilot; the primary pilot, who had flown the plane for three years, did not report any problems with the plane prior to the accident.

According to witnesses, Turner made two dry runs over the intended drop area before releasing the retardant on the third pass. During the drop run, he was off course and released the retardant earlier than desired.

NTSB interviews with Dromader pilots in airtanker operations indicated that some of the pilots were flying the drop run at an airspeed that was slower than the recommended airspeed for a retardant drop. Because of this, the National Program Manager for the SEAT fleet on Saturday halted operation of the 26 contracted Dromaders for two days so that pilots could review operational specifications of the aircraft. The "safety stand down" was lifted on Monday morning, and the Dromader pilots are now continuing firefighting operations.

Eight of the 26 Dromaders are turbine-powered, and the rest are powered by radial engines -- as was Turner's aircraft on the Utah fire. The Dromaders make up about one-third of the federal fleet of 79 SEATs.

A team of NTSB, FAA, DOI, and BLM investigators examined the accident site and wreckage one day after the crash. Evidence indicated that the aircraft impacted the ground in a near vertical, nose-down attitude. No evidence of structural failure, flight control discrepancy, or obvious catastrophic engine failure was noted at the site. The wreckage has been recovered and will be examined in detail in Phoenix, Arizona, by a team of NTSB investigators later this week.

The aircraft maintenance records were on board at the time of the accident and were destroyed in the post-crash fire.

This was the third fatal accident involving a Dromader M-18 airtanker in the past three months. All three planes were owned by Montana-based New Frontier Aviation. The first accident occurred on March 16 near Safford, Arizona, on a practice retardant drop during training exercises. The aircraft was destroyed and the pilot was killed. The plane was loaded with 400 gallons of water, and while turning left to the base leg, the plane's engine surged two or three times. Witnesses said it assumed an "unusual attitude" with the right wing up and the nose down until they lost sight of it behind a small ridgeline.

The second accident occurred on May 22 when another SEAT collided with mountainous terrain, killing the pilot, near Borah Peak, Idaho, in adverse weather conditions. The plane was on a visual flight rules (VFR) cross-country flight from Dillon, Montana, to Boise, Idaho, where it was to begin service for the BLM.

The Color Country Fire Management Area has established a memorial fund for the family of Wayne Turner, the SEAT pilot who was killed on the Dammeron Fire. To donate to this fund, send a check to Dixie Employee Association, Attn: Julianne Green, 1789 N. Wedgewood Lane, Cedar City, Utah, 84720. For more information, call **(435)865-3700**.