



# News Release

**U.S. Forest Service  
415 S. First St., Ste. 110  
Lufkin, Texas 75901-3801  
936-639-8569 or 8562**

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**March 11, 2005  
For Immediate Release**

**Public Affairs Officer – Gay Ippolito  
Public Affairs Specialist – Ernie Murray**

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## Two U.S Forest Service Employees & Pilot Die in Helicopter Crash

Three men died in a helicopter crash Thursday around 2 p.m. near Center, Texas, while conducting a prescribed burning operation in the Sabine National Forest. There were no survivors.

The National Transportation Safety Board is leading the investigation on the incident site, according to Forest Service public affairs officer Gay Ippolito of Lufkin.

Charles Edgar, 54, fire management officer for the Sabine National Forest, John Greeno, 51, Bald Mountain heliport manager with the Mi-Wok Ranger District on the Stanislaus National Forest in California, and pilot Jose' Victor Gonzalez died in the crash. The Bell Model 206-B3 helicopter was operating under contract with the Forest Service through Brainerd Company in Brainerd, Minn., to conduct prescribed burning operations in Texas. The crash site is located 11 miles southeast of Center, Texas.

As a precaution, all aviation operations on the National Forests & Grasslands in Texas are discontinued until further notice.

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03-05-07



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

Washington  
Office

14<sup>th</sup> and Independence Ave. SW.  
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Washington, DC 20090-6090

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File code: 6730  
Route to:

Date: March 12, 2005

Subject: Preliminary (24-Hour) Briefing

To: Chris Pyron, DASHO

**THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS PRELIMINARY AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

**Location:** Sabine National Forest, Sabine Ranger District, National Forests and Grasslands of Texas

**Date of occurrence:** March 10, 2005

**Time of occurrence:** Approximately 1355 CST

**Team leader:** Janette Kaiser

**Mission:** Aerial Ignition with Plastic Sphere Dispenser

**Activity:** Prescribed Fire

**Number injured:** 0

**Number of fatalities:** 3

**Property damage (such as to vessels, equipment, and structures):** Contracted Bell 206 BIII helicopter owned by Brainerd Helicopter Service, Brainerd, Minnesota

**Narrative:** A helicopter carrying two Forest Service employees and a contract helicopter pilot crashed in Southeast Texas on the Sabine National Forest. Charles Edgar, fire management officer on the Sabine National Forest, John Greeno, Bald Mountain helicopter manager with the Mi-Wok Ranger District on the Stanislaus National Forest in California, and Jose Victor Gonzales, a pilot with Brainerd Helicopter Service in Minnesota, all perished.

An investigation team is in place, lead by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The Forest Service investigation team is assisting the NTSB. Investigators arrived on March 11 and began the investigation. The on site field portion of the investigation was completed on March 12. The aircraft wreckage has been removed from the accident site. Analysis of the wreckage will continue into the near future. No probable cause has been determined by the NTSB at this time.

cc: Ralph Dorn



*Caring for the Land and Serving People*



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P.O. Box 96090  
Washington, DC 20090-6090

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File code: 6730  
Route to:

Date: March 14, 2005

Subject: Preliminary (72-Hour) Briefing

To: Chris Pyron, DASHO

**THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS PRELIMINARY AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

**Location:** Sabine National Forest, Sabine Ranger District, National Forests and Grasslands in Texas

**Date of occurrence:** March 10, 2005

**Time of occurrence:** Approximately 1354 CST

**Team leader:** Janette Kaiser

**Mission:** Aerial Ignition with Plastic Sphere Dispenser

**Activity:** Prescribed Fire

**Number injured:** 0

**Number of fatalities:** 3

**Property damage (such as to vessels, equipment, and structures):** Contracted Bell 206 BIII helicopter owned by Brainerd Helicopter Service, Brainerd, Minnesota

**Narrative:**

On March 10, 2005, approximately 1354 central standard time, a Bell 206B-III helicopter, N85BH, registered to Brainerd Helicopter Service, Inc., and operated by United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (FS), sustained substantial damage when it impacted heavily wooded terrain in the Sabine National Forest near Shelbyville, Texas. The airline transport rated pilot and two USDA Forest Service crewmembers sustained fatal injuries. Visual meteorological conditions prevailed, and the flight/mission was being monitored and conducted in accordance with USFS aviation policies for public use aircraft in fire management operations. The flight departed at 1347 from a field helicopter pad (H1), located approximately 7 miles southeast of the accident site.

On the morning of the accident, the helicopter was assigned to support a prescribed fire within heavily wooded terrain with 50-60 foot high trees near Shelbyville, TX. The prescribed fire was supported by the application of aerial ignition spheres utilizing a cabin mounted plastic sphere dispenser (PSD) machine. According to USFS operating procedures, PSD missions are typically flown at 50-150 feet above the top of vegetation at airspeeds from 20-40 knots. The helicopter was pre-positioned and a mission brief was conducted at Angelina County Airport, Lufkin,

Texas. At 0900, after the mission brief, the helicopter and re-fueling truck re-positioned to H1 (coordinates North 31 degrees 42.110 minutes West 93 degrees 52.540 minutes) and were met by support equipment and personnel from the Sabine National Forest to conduct a prescribed fire mission.

After 45 minutes of aerial ignition work, the PSD machine experienced a sphere jam, and the helicopter returned to H1 to resolve the problem. The helicopter shut down at H1 while the PSD machine problem was resolved.

The helicopter then departed H1 at 1347 to resume the mission. According to USFS dispatch records, at 1352, the mission ignition specialist onboard the aircraft reported by radio that the helicopter was commencing firing operations. At 1354, a radio distress call was heard on the assigned Forest Service tactical frequency by ground personnel. According to USFS personnel, the voice making the distress call appeared to be that of the ignition specialist, not the pilot. The call was, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, we are going down." No further communications were heard from the helicopter.

At 1417, the helicopter wreckage was found at coordinates North 31 degrees 45.425 minutes West 94 degrees 00.244 minutes. Immediate rescue operations commenced.

The nearest automated weather observing system at the A.L. Mangham Junior Regional Airport, near Nacogdoches, Texas, located approximately 30 miles southwest of the accident site, reported wind from 250 degrees at 5 knots, 10 statute miles visibility, a clear sky, temperature 22 degrees Celsius, dew point 3 degrees Celsius, and a barometric pressure setting of 29.92 inches of Mercury.

An investigation team is in place, lead by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The Forest Service investigation team is assisting the NTSB. Investigators arrived on March 11 and began the investigation. The on site field portion of the investigation was completed on March 12. The aircraft wreckage has been removed from the accident site. Analysis of the wreckage will continue into the near future. No probable cause has been determined by the NTSB at this time.

cc: Ralph Dorn



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