

# Rapid Lesson Sharing



**Event Type:** Chemical Exposure/Environmental Hazards

**Date:** September 1, 2018

**Location:** Lakeside Fire, Utah

*“It tasted like I had pennies in my mouth.”*

## Air Attack

### Narrative Summary

On September 1, ground and aviation resources were dispatched to a fire near an industrial plant. The initial attack response included a combination of state, county, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management firefighting resources, including multiple aircraft, engines, and overhead.

Resources noticed the wind aligned with the smoke from the industrial plant, bending it directly toward the fire response area.

As resources responded, there was uncertainty as to what would be appropriate as a response for this fire. Initially, some of the state and local initial attack resources and Incident Commander were unclear of the safety concerns in the area. However, once federal ground resources were on scene, it was determined by the federal Agency Administrators that the federal ground resources would hold five miles away and aviation resources could be utilized.

Although there was some discussion about aviation resources remaining clear of the smoke from the industrial plant and only engaging if they felt they could do so safely, it is unclear if all responding air resources initially heard this information.

### Nausea, Body Aches, Itching and Burning Skin and Eyes

After engaging in firefighting efforts, some aviation resources over the fire and others stationed nearly five miles from the industrial plant began reporting a taste of metal in their mouths. Concerned that they may have been exposed to hazardous emissions, they chose to disengage from the fire.

A pilot later sought medical attention after experiencing nausea and a burning sensation in his eyes. Other aviation personnel reported experiencing several days of symptoms including nausea, body aches, itching and burning skin and eyes, as well as upper respiratory, flu, or allergy congestion.

### Key Lessons

- ❖ To prevent conflicting guidance between responding agencies or transferring risk to the agency with the least restrictive policies, a clear interagency operational policy is needed for areas located near known environmental hazard areas.
- ❖ Where there is uncertainty, or “gray” areas, Dispatchers rely on the Duty Officers to provide direction. The Duty Officers rely on the Agency Administrator for the final decision. Anything that can be done to pre-communicate Agency Administrator decisions of fire operations in the vicinity of known environmental hazards can improve service to the responders. One proposed solution was to develop a predetermined response plan or “run card” with Agency Administrator direction specific for these pre-identified areas.

- ❖ Local ground and aviation resources expressed concern that they were not educated or trained in the “hazardous area” and were unfamiliar with the exact chemical or sources of pollution or proper mitigation measures to take. It is recommended that these places be clearly identified in local response operating plans, briefing packets, local area maps, and appropriate response plans (run cards). It is critical that these areas and mitigation measures are discussed during preseason meetings, training, as well as during pre-operational briefings and tail gate safety sessions. It was suggested that to conduct scenarios or drills for events like this, including Dispatch, may help lessen confusion for future events in the area.
- ❖ Non-local aviation resources are asked to respond to unfamiliar areas regularly. It is important for resources who may be unfamiliar with local areas to receive a good briefing, local aerial hazard maps, and specific hazard information on the resource order form. It was also recommended that the aerial hazard maps and resource order forms identify the location (proximity and/or ceiling as applicable) as well as include any know mitigation measures.
- ❖ There was some concern about transferring risk to aviation resources who may be exposed to the same hazards as ground resources. Even though some pilots reported they never flew through the industrial smoke, they still experienced adverse symptoms. Fortunately, various resources began voicing concern and ultimately decided to disengage from the operations. Fire managers would like to remind air resources if they are concerned with any part of an operation they have been asked to participate in, there is always an option to turn down the mission. This is also a good opportunity for a reminder that if one resource has concern with or has turned down the mission, it is important that this information be communicated to other resources responding, as well as to Dispatch.

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*“We know it’s out there.  
What is our contingency plan?”*

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**Lead Plane Pilot**

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*“We’re transferring risk  
to the Air Crew.”*

**Pilot**

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There is a lot of emotional response which has been expressed from responders about being sent into either a real or perceived hazardous situation. It may be useful to hold an open-session After Action Review to discuss what happened and identify opportunities to improve.

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