

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Retardant Drop on Engine

Date: July 14, 2014

Location: Saddle Draw Fire



***“There was no indication that he was going to drop.
I would not have been on the line if I had known.”***

Engine Captain

NARRATIVE

On July 14, 2014 a Type 4 Engine assigned to the Saddle Draw Fire was directly hit by a retardant drop from a Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT). No injuries to personnel occurred and no property damage was done to any equipment.

This fire, started by lightning the previous day, was just one of many fire starts occurring near or on the boundary of two BLM Districts. During the July 13 evening and July 14 morning, the initial responding resources coordinated action on accessible fires. Action was not taken on the Saddle Draw Fire until approximately 0700 on July 14. At this time, the fire was 60 acres with low winds presenting moderate spread. A request was made for an additional two heavy engines.



This Type 4 Engine—temporarily painted red—took a direct retardant hit from a Single Engine Air Tanker on the Saddle Draw Fire.

As the day progressed through morning into early afternoon, due to increasing winds, all fires in the area were beginning to see more active fire behavior. The engine crews continued to successfully flank the Saddle Draw Fire with assistance from the assigned helicopter that was making bucket drops. The fire continued to make runs pushed by the wind.

Earlier in the day, the IC inquired about air support and SEATS for retardant. While the IC was unable to get an Air Attack assigned specifically to the Saddle Draw incident, there was one assigned to an adjacent incident that had TFR coverage over the incidents in the area, including the Saddle Draw Fire.

At approximately 1430, a finger of the Saddle Draw Fire began to make a run. Engines and the helicopter worked to contain it. Because of the fire’s rapid growth, more resources were ordered at this time.

***“I didn’t feel comfortable with the situation of
the airspace over the fire.”***

Helicopter Foreman

At 1500, the Helicopter Foreman, who had been handling air operations, inquired again about the availability of an Air Attack. From his perspective on the ground, air-to-ground frequencies were beginning to get a lot of “bleed over” from other fires. The airspace over head was beginning to

get congested due to aerial resources on adjacent fires utilizing airspace over the Saddle Draw Fire.

On the north flank of the break-out finger, three engines were working together doing a mobile attack on the fire. The engines were making “good progress” working on a flat ridge line where the fuels were “low grass and shrub”. The lead engine ran out of water and was proceeding to turn around. As they were making their turn, “over the ridge pops a SEAT” says the Engine Captain. The SEAT released its entire load of retardant which hit the engine. According to the Engine Captain: “There was no indication that he was going to drop. I would not have been on the line if I had known”. With proper warning, the engine crew believes they could have been clear of the area.

The engines proceeded to use available water to wash the excessive amount of retardant from the engine. The time is approximately 1645.

At 1720, the Helicopter Foreman makes the decision to shut down the air show over the Saddle Draw Fire because of the congestion of the SEATS assigned to this incident—as well as the SEATS flying on the adjacent fires. “I didn’t feel comfortable with the situation of the airspace over the fire,” said the Helicopter Foreman. The helicopter remained engaged on the fire focusing on structure protection.

Excerpts from the SAFECOM filed by the Incident Commander

At 2000, all resources gathered for a briefing to discuss a new strategy. At that time, I noticed that an Engine had been painted by retardant. The Engine Boss explained that the incident had occurred while working the line around 1600-1700. Talking to the parties involved, we are unsure which of the three SEAT planes dropped the retardant on the Engine. There was no apparent damage to the vehicle.

Corrective Action: There was no corrective action taken, as the IC was not notified in a timely matter of the incident. The photo (shown on previous page) surfaced several weeks later.

(The entire SAFECOM is available at: <https://www.safecom.gov/searchone.asp?ID=19107>.)

LESSONS

- ✓ Ensure to communicate issues immediately with honest, critical feedback between aerial and ground personnel. Timely communication helps facilitate improvements to tactics, objectives, and safety.
- ✓ Consider incorporating fires that are in close proximity under one aerial supervisor.
- ✓ It is important to have a clear understanding of objectives and instructions with good target description from ground resources. Offer training and classes for target description with fixed-winged aircraft.
- ✓ Strive to work with dispatch to find frequencies that can be temporarily utilized until more permanent ones can be established.
- ✓ Closely monitor radio traffic for maintaining situational awareness of aerial resources and any approaching aircraft to your area.
- ✓ Report events promptly whenever possible, ensuring to capture the details of the event accurately without losing valuable information.

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With support from the Pacific Northwest
Wildfire Coordinating Group



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