Short-Haul Fire Insertion: "Safest and Most Efficient Way to Contain this Fire"

On the morning of July 2, Mesa Verde Helitack (7BH) based at Mesa Verde National Park, was asked to check on a smoke report that was observed by U.S. Forest Service personnel the evening before on the San Juan National Forest. The fire was in a remote area with no road access, near the tree line at approximately 10,500 feet. An aerial fire size-up was relayed to Durango Dispatch. The fire was burning in heavy timber with dead and down trees. Fire behavior was minimal/smoldering and was estimated at 1/10 of an acre.

7BH and flight crew lifted from the Durango Airport around 0930 with a Short-Haul Spotter (SHLS)/Helicopter Manager (HMGB); ICT5/Short-Hauler (SHLR); and FFT2/SHLR on board. 7BH also carries a full Initial Attack (IA) compliment with Bambi Bucket, firefighting tools, and short-haul equipment during initial attack. The short-haul equipment includes a 250-foot haul line, Y-lanyard, patient harness, haul/pack-out bag, and short-haul/spotter harnesses.

The Mesa Verde Helitack Crew configures gear for a short-haul operation.

Large thunder cells were already starting to build in the area, but winds were favorable for flying. The direction from the U.S. Forest Service District Duty Officer was to take action on the fire and contain it. The only suitable helispot was located about two nautical air miles away and 1,000 feet below the fire.

Short-Haul Risk Assessment Conducted

An aerial recon was conducted from the helispot up to the fire looking for the best route to hike in. While conducting the recon, a short-haul insertion site was also located near the fire. After considering the options of hiking in versus a short-haul for fire insertion, a risk assessment was conducted considering both options.

Because of the amount of time it would have taken to hike two personnel in, contain the fire, and hike back out—and with the potential for adverse weather moving in—everyone on board agreed that a short-haul fire insertion would be the safest and most efficient way to contain the fire.

The Duty Officer was contacted on the radio and the crew relayed that a short-haul operation would be the best, safest option for getting fire personnel into the fire quickly. The Duty Officer agreed and gave the approval to proceed.

Timeline

1000

7BH lands at the helispot, shuts down, and reconfigures the aircraft for short-haul operations by attaching the Y-lanyard and short-haul line to the helicopter. Additionally, the short-haulers reconfigure their equipment by putting initial attack tools and saws into the haul bag. The crew completes a Risk Assessment for the short-haul operation using the Green, Amber, Red (GAR) Model.

1020

7BH lifts from the helispot, the crew discusses final short-haul site selection as well as fire behavior, and two firefighters/SHLR are inserted into the short-haul site approximately 50 yards from the fire.

1030

7BH returns to the helispot, shuts down, removes short-haul equipment and reconfigures for normal aircraft flight operations.

1045

7BH lifts from the helispot and flies back to Durango Airport for fuel with HMGB.

1200

7BH lifts from the Durango Airport with SHLS/HMGB on board and flies back up to the helispot, configures for short-haul and prepositions for firefighter extraction due to weather concerns.

1230

The fire is contained, 7BH lifts from the helispot and extracts two firefighters/SHLR from short-haul site due to deteriorating weather in the area.

1240

The two firefighters/SHLR are inserted into the helispot. 7BH lands, removes short-haul equipment and reconfigures for normal aircraft flight operations.

1250

7BH lifts from helispot and flies back to Durango Airport with all personnel on board.

The Duty Officer's Perspective

" Having worked on the Columbine Ranger District for more than 10 years, I felt very comfortable knowing what kind of terrain and access I was dealing with in trying to get firefighters into this area.

We have used rappellers, helitack and smokejumpers before on the Columbine Ranger District. This seemed like a very easy decision to make knowing this was one more option available to contain the fire efficiently and safely.

I had a quick response and answer from the Forest Duty Officer and support from the Fire Management Officer and Agency Administrator.

I am completely satisfied with the operation and the product that Mesa Verde Helitack provided and would definitely use them or other short-haul helicopters for future delivery of firefighters to staff fires. "

Mesa Verde's Short-Haul History

In 2019, Mesa Verde Helitack received approval from the National Park Service (NPS) national office to utilize short-haul for initial attack fire operations. Most of the National Park Service short-haul crews are approved for short-haul for fire operations, including initial attack.

In August 2021, the U.S. Forest Service issued a memo authorizing all NPS helicopter programs that have the "Short-Haul for Fire Operations" enhancement to conduct short-haul for fire operations – including initial attack – on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Mesa Verde Helitack has been training for short-haul for fire operations since 2019. The only difference in procedures/equipment from a medical short-haul is the haul/pack-out bag that is used for carrying fire tools instead of medical equipment. The pack-out bag consists of fire tools, chainsaw, and sig-pack: fuel/wedges/chaps.

Lessons

❖ When making real time decisions about staffing fires, it is important to consider all your options and include an intentional risk assessment to make informed decisions. For National Park Service short-haul crews, short-haul insertion for initial attack is an option.

The Mesa Verde Helitack Crew performs a short-haul training operation.

This RLS was submitted by:

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