

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: UTV Rollover

Date: August 14, 2026

Location: Candle Fire, South Dakota

The Story and Lessons from this UTV Rollover Incident

During suppression operations, at approximately 1900 hours, two employees were travelling in a 2020 Polaris Ranger XP 1000, single-cab UTV down a steep, 34-degree slope. The UTV's bed box was loaded with a filled QTAC 85HP firefighting slip-in water tank and pump, affixed with an electric reel, with a combined weight of approximately 970 pounds. Throughout the descent, the ground surface was dry, soft, sandy, rocky, and uneven.

While descending this slope at an angle, travelling at approximately 2-3 mph, the UTV's rear end began to fishtail. The driver applied the brakes in an attempt to stop the skid. But the combination of the steep slope, heavy/dynamic cargo, sudden braking, and vehicle's inertia triggered a rollover. The Polaris Ranger rolled 1.5 to 2.5 times before coming to rest on the driver's side.

Although both occupants remained inside the vehicle, neither had their seatbelts fastened.

Post-incident interviews identified several preventable conditions and actions that offer critical lessons for future UTV operations.



Photo of the UTV in its final position post rollover.

Lessons

- **Fasten restraints before moving.** It is the operator's responsibility to ensure that occupants are properly restrained before the vehicle moves.
- **Ensure PPE is appropriate and secured.** Helmets were being worn, but chinstraps were not fastened. However, considering the terrain, this task could be considered high risk, requiring at least 3/4 or full-face helmets.
- **Know your vehicle.** Conditions and locations constantly change. Operators should therefore be knowledgeable about the vehicle's safe operating ranges and/or limitations.
- **Know your cargo.** Heavy loads, especially dynamic cargo (sloshing liquids), create shifting weight and increased inertia—making the vehicle harder to stop or control.
- **Avoid abrupt corrections.** Hard braking and turning, combined with steep slopes and heavy/dynamic cargo can rapidly turn a fishtail into a rollover.
- **Control descent with gearing.** Use low gear and engine braking rather than relying solely on mechanical brakes to manage speed on declines.
- **Conduct localized training.** Operators should practice navigating local hazards, including steep slopes and loose soil before operating in these environments.
- **Encourage others to speak up.** Operators and passengers should be encouraged to speak up and stop movement if conditions feel unsafe or other options are present.

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