

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: UTV Rollover

Date: July 28, 2026

Location: Upper Smith Fire, Bonners Ferry Ranger District, Idaho Panhandle National Forests

The Story and Lessons from this UTV Rollover Incident

"We just started rolling so fast.

It was just so fast."

UTV Passenger

On Tuesday, July 28, after working on Division India of the Upper Smith Fire for several days, an Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) was moved to Division Alpha and tasked with scouting hose lay and handline from Drop Point(DP)16 to DP17 ahead of planned firing operations.

A small module of the crew obtained a contracted UTV—a 2022 Can-Am Defender HD9—from ground support and moved to DP16, where five crew members loaded into the vehicle and began driving up the steep, narrow dirt road to DP17. (See photo on right.)

Three crew members, including the driver, were seated in the front of the UTV with two passengers in the back seats—all were wearing their Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Line gear was loaded into the cargo bed. The machine's weight capacity was not exceeded.

The driver, a qualified and experienced UTV operator, began the ascent with the vehicle in 2WD-High. After noticing a loss of traction midway up the slope, the driver brought the vehicle to a stop to shift to 4WD-Low.

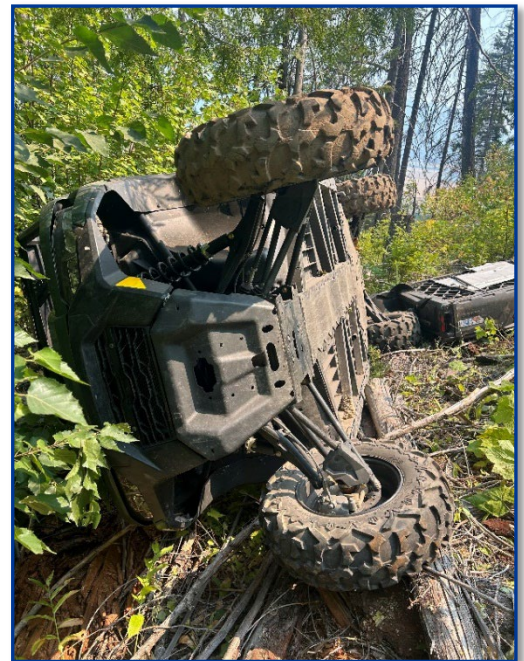
After shifting gears, the wheels of the UTV spun and could not gain traction. As the vehicle began to roll backward down the hill, the driver repeatedly attempted alternating between the gas and brakes.

The brakes did not engage. The UTV quickly rolled backward and over the embankment at the road's edge. The UTV rolled sideways two to four times over approximately 60 feet in distance and came to rest on the passenger side—with all crew members still secured in place by their seat belts.

The impact had enough force to separate the cargo bed from the body of the machine.



The road to Drop Point 17.



The UTV in its final resting place.

Once the UTV came to a stop, the crew members were able to verbally confirm that everyone was conscious and unharmed before unbuckling and removing themselves from the vehicle.

The Squad Boss communicated this rollover incident to the IHC Superintendent via the radio as the crew began gathering their gear from the wreckage and hiking back up to the road.

The crew's medics arrived shortly after to complete initial patient assessments, followed by the Incident Management Team's Medical Unit Leader (MEDL) and Rapid Extraction Module Support (REMS), who confirmed that there were no injuries and offered a briefing on how to identify head injuries that may not be immediately apparent.

Lessons

"From now on, if we're on a new piece of line, we're going to send the minimum number of people in the UTV to scout the road."

The IHC Superintendent

1. Always start in 4WD-Low when driving uphill in UTVs, especially on unfamiliar roads or trails.
2. Take the minimum number of passengers in UTVs until familiar with road conditions. When possible, thoroughly assess routes before attempting to drive them or request intel from other crews or individuals familiar with the route.
3. Carry medical gear on person, even for routine scouting missions.
4. Ensure that radios are secured on your person or within the vehicle to maintain communication capabilities in case of emergency.
5. To become familiar with machine capabilities and ensure functionality before use, crews should perform their own inspections after receiving equipment from ground support.

Successes

1. All crew members were wearing seat belts and fireline PPE, which proved instrumental in preventing injuries.
 2. Clear and calm communications allowed for an organized and appropriate response to this Incident Within an Incident (IWI).
 3. The tempo of work on the fireline was moderated and methodical to ensure that crews were not feeling rushed—or pushed to make hasty decisions.
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The RLS Team

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