

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: UTV Rollover

Date: Aug. 20, 2015

Location: Rattlesnake Fire;
Arizona



“I wasn’t concerned about the terrain. I’ve operated my own Ranger [Polaris Ranger UTV] in similar terrain and road conditions.”

**UTV Operator whose machine
slid into ditch.**

NARRATIVE

Six firefighters on two UTVs (two drivers, each with two passengers), are returning from a scouting mission on the southwest corner of the Rattlesnake Fire. They are exiting the area—now traveling downslope—on the same jeep trail that they’d entered on.

This “road”, designated as a non-motorized trail, was once part of the Forest road system network. It had previously been washed out and therefore had some deep water grooving (see photos). This condition is not uncommon for roads/trails in this area.

UTV operator: *“I wasn’t concerned about the terrain. I’ve operated my own Ranger [Polaris Ranger UTV] in similar terrain and road conditions.”*

UTV Gets Hung-Up on Undercarriage

As the UTVs approach this descent at a very slow speed (less than 1 mph), the operators line-up their best path of descent down this steep jeep trail.

As the second UTV starts its descent, the passenger-side wheels slide into the wash-out ditch area. The UTV comes to a stop. It is leaning severely over onto the machine’s passenger side. It is “hung-up” on its frame’s undercarriage.



Photos show where the descending UTV slid into this wash-out ditch area. The UTV came to a stop, severely leaning over onto the passenger’s side. When the operator and two passengers exit the UTV, the reduction of the vehicle’s weight allows the UTV’s suspension to rise—freeing the UTV’s undercarriage. Even with the engine off and the transmission engaged, the UTV moves down the hill and eventually rolls over.



The plan is for the passengers and operator to exit the UTV, assess the situation, and try to bring the UTV back to a safer angle/lean . . .

The operator recognizes that due to the combination of the descent angle and severe lean, the UTV should stay in place. The operator therefore secures the UTV—turning off the engine and leaving the transmission engaged.

UTV Begins to Roll Down the Trail

The plan is for the two passengers and operator to exit the UTV, assess the situation, and try to bring the UTV back to a safer angle/lean that will enable them to continue on their way back to their vehicles.

But as the passengers and operator exit the UTV, the subsequent reduction of the vehicle's weight allows for the UTV's suspension to rise—freeing the UTV's undercarriage.

Even with the engine off and the transmission engaged, the UTV begins to roll down the trail. Forward momentum carries the UTV some distance before it hits another washed out area, causing the UTV to roll over. The vehicle comes to rest midway down the trail.

After ensuring that no one is injured, the two crews roll the UTV back over and safely move it down the remaining descent of the trail.

The unit then reports their situation to the Division Supervisor and requests additional assistance. During the rollover and re-righting of the UTV, two of the tires flatten. In addition, they become un-beaded (unseated from the rim) which prevents them from being refilled unless they are forced back onto the rim. A short time later, follow-up assistance is rendered, but it is determined that the UTV has undergone some additional mechanical issues.

Because of impending nightfall, the crew is ferried out. The UTV is later recovered. It sustained minimal damage.

LESSONS

- ✓ Even if you are an experienced UTV operator, always plan for the worst case scenario. In this incident, setting the emergency brake may have prevented the UTV from rolling.
- ✓ When in a questionable situation, stop. Assess the situation and develop a plan to mitigate the situation. In this case, they made the right decision—unfortunately, gravity and terrain won.
- ✓ Selecting the right tool for the job is very important. The use of UTVs in this situation was the appropriate tool for the job. The access in this area is extremely rough with narrow roads/trails and un-accessible to normal (low clearance) vehicle travel.

**This RLS was submitted by:
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