

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Short-Haul Emergency Assistance to the Public

Date: August 18, 2018

Location: Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, Idaho

Hearing the Medical Incident Report made him cringe: *Two critically injured patients with second and third degree full body burns; aggressive bees covering and stinging the patients and the rescuers; a crashed airplane that was still on fire; and all in the middle of the largest contiguous wilderness area outside of Alaska.*

"How can we assist the local county and get these guys out alive?" wondered the Salmon-Challis Forest Duty Officer.

What Happened?

Lemhi County Dispatch received a report of a plane crash and a resulting wildland fire deep in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. The Salmon-Challis National Forest responded with the Challis Helitack Crew whose primary mission was to size-up the reported fire.

After spotting survivors near the crash site, the crew identified and was able to land at an unimproved landing spot suitable for a Type 3 Helicopter above the crashed aircraft.

They reported that the aircraft was still smoldering, but that the fire was contained.

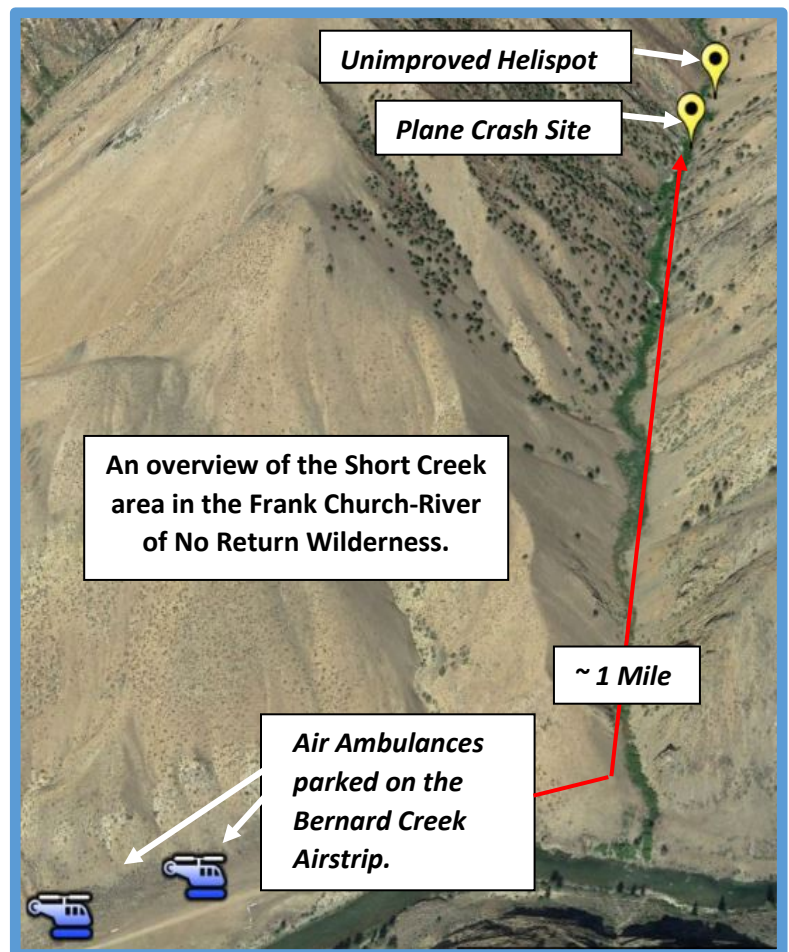
Medical Incident Report Provided to Dispatch Center

Qualified in first aid, the Challis Helitack Crew provided a Medical Incident Report to the Central Idaho Interagency Dispatch Center (CIC), who was able to convey the information to Valley County Dispatch, the county with the jurisdictional search and rescue responsibility.

The Challis Helitack crew reported that a hoist-capable helicopter evacuation would be preferred, but with two backboards and 20 additional rescuers they may be able to evacuate the injured patients to a nearby airstrip.

Taking into account the remote location, the severity of the injuries, and the significant risk to the rescuers, the Forest Duty Officer and CIC continued exploring all of their available options.

The Salmon-Challis Duty Officer worked with the CIC to coordinate with the appropriate agencies for the response. Valley County ordered Two Bear Air, a private hoist-capable helicopter evacuation platform and two Air Ambulances, which were able to land at the Bernard Creek Airstrip but not the Helispot.



The Challis Helitack was able to shuttle two members of an Air Ambulance crew to the unimproved Helispot. Once on scene, the Air Ambulance crew took control of the medical response and confirmed that patients needed immediate evacuation.

Potential Options Considered

As more information became available, the Forest Duty Officer and CIC considered their options: Two Bear Air was still three hours out, and getting 20 rescuers to a remote location and carrying out a ground operation would be time consuming and require a significant risk.

When the Challis Helitack Crew relayed that one of the patients would not be able to walk, the option of using a Forest Service Short-Haul capable helicopter from the adjacent Payette National Forest was considered.

Valley County and the two Forests explored this option together, and coordination occurred with: both Forest's Zone Fire Management Officers, Forest Duty Officers, Fire Staff Officers, and Forest Supervisors. Additionally, the situation was communicated to the Intermountain Regional Office, external partners such as StateComm (Idaho's emergency management center), and the National Transportation Safety Board.

Short-Haul is Best Option – Krassel Helitack is Dispatched

While the bees continued to swarm the patients and rescuers, all parties agreed that Short-Haul was their best option because it would get the patients to higher medical care quickly and would minimize risk and trauma to the rescuers.



Krassel Helitack during a training mission.

CIC advised Valley County to formally request the helicopter through the Payette National Forest and Valley County's established agreement. The Short-Haul equipped Krassel Helitack was dispatched. Once on scene, the pilot and crew determined that using Short-Haul was appropriate.

The Challis Helitack and Krassel Helitack crews worked together to coordinate the evacuation of the injured public member to the waiting Air Ambulances. The ambulatory patient was evacuated and transported internally by Challis Helitack to one of the Air Ambulances waiting at the Bernard Creek Airstrip. The other patient was Short-Hauled to the Bernard Creek Airstrip by Krassel Helitack.

In all, there were six aircraft involved (including the crashed public plane and Two Bear Air, who arrived after the mission was complete). Once the patients were transferred to the Air Ambulances, the firefighters got back to their normal work. The wildland fire associated with the air crash required their attention.

The Salmon-Challis Forest Duty Officer reflected, *"We were probably in between our two basic authorities to provide for public assistance. We were supporting the county's mission, but we had to temporarily take the lead because of the remoteness of the incident, the severity of the injuries, and the fact that we were first on scene."*

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Salmon-Challis Forest Duty Officer

When can the Forest Service Provide SAR and/or EMS Assistance to the Public?

The short answer is: It depends.

The Forest Service is authorized to treat and transport members of the public injured on National Forest System lands on an incidental basis, per 16 USC 554b and 16 USC 575, and then deliver them to the appropriate response agency, which is usually the county sheriff.

Federal Agencies other than the U.S. Forest Service have their own policies for providing search and rescue assistance to the public. But in this case the Forest Service provided assistance under policy found in FSM 1599.03, which states:

“The Forest Service shall take a temporary lead role in any search and rescue emergency in which immediate and quick response will reduce suffering or save lives. The concept of closest forces must be used and the lead role maintained only until the predetermined local responsible authority is available to assume its leadership. After transferring the leadership role, the Forest Service shall assume a supportive role and provide assistance to the fullest extent possible.”

Outside of National Forest System lands, the local response agency retains the authority to provide public assistance. Unless it is a happenstance encounter where Forest Service personnel happen to be first on scene, the Forest Service does not have the authority to provide assistance to the public.

Consider This Scenario:

You are driving along the highway (outside of National Forest System lands) in a government vehicle when the car in front of you swerves off the road and into the ditch. The driver is injured and you have been trained in first aid. What do you do? Are you within your authority? Why or why not?

In the end, a good understanding of authorities and policy, good coordination, and technical expertise were what helped save the lives of the two injured members of the public at Short Creek.

When your unit is faced with a similar scenario, will you have all these factors in play?

This RLS was submitted by:

Safety and Occupational Health Manager

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