

“Shocked, Drenched and Furious”— Lessons from a Lack of Air-to-Ground Communication

*This RLS was written by the
Assistant Crew Boss on the 10-Person Hand Crew
Suppression Module involved in this incident*

My crew was tasked to help support our neighboring Ranger District on the 50-acre Molybdenite Fire, burning in timber, brush and grass.

When we arrived on the fire and had our initial briefing on how we could help in the operations on the fire, my Crew Boss, the IC Trainee and I decided that for line construction to safely continue, the lower right flank of the fire needed to be snagged.

Once I got my swamper off our crew and the “go ahead” from the fire’s Incident Commander, I started dropping hazard trees next to the fire’s edge, just off the road on the fire’s lower right flank.

Air Attack was coordinating retardant drops on the head of the fire and bucket work on the fire’s upper right flank.

I was about 200 feet up from the bottom of the fire, getting ready to drop my last snag. It was burned out at the base and the top. I had just put in my face-cut. I looked down for a second to place my bar where I was going to start my back cut.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I felt a shower of water as a shadow from a helicopter that just dropped water from its bucket moved over the top of me.

I was shocked, drenched and furious at that moment. Luckily, I fell the tree safely and the tree didn’t come apart on me while I was underneath it when the bucket drop occurred.

I immediately got on the radio and notified my Crew Boss about what had just happened.



A sawyer removes overhead hazards on the Molybdenite Fire five days after this incident with the helicopter bucket drop.
(Photo courtesy InciWeb.)

Lessons

In retrospect, after this incident occurred, I think I could have responded and addressed it better. But at that time, I was pretty fired-up. I probably could have talked with Air Attack to determine what the heck this rogue helicopter was doing—dropping on the lower third of the fire where I was falling.

I know many times it comes down to communication breakdowns when things go wrong on fires, especially when there are a lot of moving parts on an active initial attack incident with lots of aircraft in the air.

After this water drop incident happened to me, a ground contact was assigned to the fire to coordinate with Air Attack and ground resources.

My main takeaways from this incident are how essential communication and situation awareness is—and the need to have a ground contact assigned when folks are out on the line.

This RLS was submitted by:

**Assistant Crew Boss 10-Person Hand Crew
Suppression Module**

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