

Pilot Statement Regarding the Helicopter N21BH on the Bench Lakes Fire Collected at 2230 July 11, 2024.

Aircraft flew 0.6 total from North Fork Helibase to the fire for recon then landed at Stanley Helispot. 1st round of buckets was with a 50' long line with a 120 gallon bucket set at 80%. While lifting at Stanley Helispot for buckets, pilot felt a snag on the line. Pilot and ground crew looked and all appeared normal. 1st bucket pulled from Bench Lake was a pull and drop, to confirm bucket would release. Pilot performed 29 bucket drops and felt good about the operation. Wind was light and variable for the first 29 bucket cycles. Pilot kept looking at his temp and torque gage. Out of the 29 picks, 25 were with clean wind, 4 picks indicated changing winds. Approx 1hr 20 min of flight time for the first 29 bucket picks and drops. Pilot felt great.

Aircraft returned to Stanley for fuel. Winds at Stanley HS were west- north west. Pilot landed pointing west. Helitack helped pull long line out while landing. After shut down, pilot noticed a grounding rod near the tail boom sticking up approximately 3' tall. Pilot inspected the aircraft with no damage observed. Inspected bucket and found that one cable was snapped. Heli refueled and swapped a cable off of a 144 gal bucket and put it on the 120 gal bucket. Manual and electrical checks completed. Aircraft returned to the fire with 439 lbs of fuel, 50' long line and 120 gallon bucket set at 80%. Pilot called dispatch for flight follow and updated sizeup. IC was notified.

Winds had picked up, still out of the west, down the lake. Pilot stated that he did not felt rushed to put the fire out, no way he was putting it out. Just trying to keep the fire in check. At time of accident, approximately 329 lbs of fuel was on board between bucket number 13 and 14 of the 2nd cycle. Left downwind approach just like all the other picks from the lake. Pilot felt a windshift that pushed him down, tried to pull collective which resulted in settling with power. Action was to lower the collective, right cyclic and left pedal. At that point, bucket hit the water, resulting in dynamic rollover. Aircraft nosed in, pilot was up to waist in water. With nose sinking, pilot unbuckled, got out and the aircraft nosed over and belly up. Pilot got on top of belly of aircraft. Aircraft starts to sink, pilot jumps in water, starts to swim away. Pilots helmet was still plugged in, he got back on top of the belly of the helicopter, took helmet off and deployed pfd, then swam to shore. Pilot called 911 at 1713. Mechanic called pilot at 1729. Established phone contact with Rasmussen and helibase. Made physical contact with the IC approximately 1740.

As told to me, Ryder Bennett (Helitack Superintendent) by the pilot of N21BH, Todd Kubista.

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