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Official: 9 deaths 'fair certainty' in helicopter crash

- Story Highlights
- Investigators fairly certain nine people killed in Tuesday crash, official says
- Wreck happened 150 yards from takeoff site, NTSB official says
- One of the four survivors helped fellow survivor escape, official says
- Helicopter had just picked up firefighters when it wrecked in national forest

WEAVERVILLE, California (CNN) -- Investigators believe "with fair certainty" that nine people were killed in Tuesday evening's crash of a helicopter that was shuttling firefighters in northern California, a sheriff's official said Thursday.

Nine people had been declared missing and four survivors were hospitalized after a Sikorsky S-61 helicopter crashed in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

The crash happened after the helicopter picked up contract firefighters assigned to battle lightning-sparked wildfires in the forest, officials said.

Investigators are fairly certain the nine who previously were declared missing died, said Eric Palmer, undersheriff of Trinity County, citing investigators' observations and eyewitness accounts.

Some remains have been found at the crash site, Palmer said.

"They have made the ultimate sacrifice for us," Trinity County Sheriff Lorrac Craig said.

Seven of those killed were firefighters employed with Grayback Forestry, the company said Thursday. The two others were believed to be a co-pilot and someone else not employed by Grayback.

Palmer declined to name the dead, but the company identified six of the dead firefighters as Shawn Blazer, 30, from Medford, Oregon; Scott Charleson, 25, from Phoenix, Oregon; Matthew Hammer, 23, from Grants Pass, Oregon; Edrik Gomez, 19, from Ashland, Oregon; Bryan Rich, 29, from Medford; and David Steele, 19, from Ashland.

The company, based in Merlin, Oregon, was withholding identification of the seventh because it hadn't been able to find the person's family, spokeswoman Kelli Matthews said.

Four survivors -- a co-pilot and three Grayback firefighters -- were hospitalized. Grayback said the three surviving firefighters are Michael Brown, 20, Jonathan Frohreich, 18, and Rick Schroeder, 42.

The injured were at two hospitals: Mercy Medical Center in Redding and the University of California-Davis Medical Center. The extent of their injuries was not immediately released.

The helicopter had just picked up firefighters from one base and was going to shuttle them to another when it crashed about 150 yards from the takeoff site about 7:45 p.m. Tuesday, said Kitty Higgins of the [National Transportation Safety Board](#), which is

investigating the wreck.  [Watch Higgins describe what she knows about the crash »](#)

Two of the four survivors were on fire when they escaped the wreckage, Higgins said. A third survivor escaped on his own and pulled out the fourth, Higgins said.

Other firefighters waiting to be picked up in the area 35 miles west of Redding witnessed the crash and rushed to try to help those onboard.

Schroeder, in a phone interview Wednesday night with the Los Angeles Times from his hospital room, said it seemed the helicopter's rotor hit a tree during takeoff.

Schroeder said he blacked out on impact after the helicopter plummeted, and he awoke to find a body on him, the Times reported.

He said he unbuckled himself, got outside and went up a slope, where he watched the helicopter explode, according to the Times.

"I was totally shocked," he said, according to the Times. "I lost all my friends."

Schroeder said he suffered serious injuries to his neck, shoulder and back but didn't suffer any burns, the Times reported.

Brown, in a telephone interview Thursday from his hospital room, told the Times that an approaching storm had prompted his crew to board the helicopter to leave the area.

Brown suffered broken face bones, a broken leg, a bruised liver and leg burns, the Times reported.

"These guys were all my brothers," he told the Times, referring to those who died. "I wish they were here with me."

The crash site is near one of the park's four wildfires that firefighters have been battling, the [U.S. Forest Service](#) said. Officials said the site is steep, rugged and difficult to access.

NTSB investigators will be examining the helicopter's voice data recorder and maintenance record as well as Tuesday's weather conditions, Higgins said.

The helicopter was owned by Carson Helicopters, whose firefighting division is based in Grants Pass, Oregon.

The four fires have burned more than 84,000 acres since they started on or about June 21, the forest service said.

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