



Feds accuse two southern Oregon men of conspiring to defraud Forest Service



By [Bryan Denson, The Oregonian](#)

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Two southern Oregon men have been indicted for their roles in an alleged conspiracy to defraud the U.S. Forest Service in 2008 as they provided helicopter services to fight wildfires, [including a helicopter that crashed in Northern California and killed nine people](#).

[The indictment accuses](#) the two men of falsifying the weight and takeoff power of the helicopter that crashed.

Steven Metheny, the 42-year-old former vice president of Carson Helicopters, in Grants Pass, and Levi Phillips, 45, who lives in the southern Oregon town, were charged by a federal grand jury last week in Medford, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office for Oregon.

"Metheny was also charged in 22 other counts with mail and wire fraud, making false statements to the Forest Service, endangering the safety of aircraft in flight, and theft from an interstate shipment," according to a news release.

The men face a potential 20-year prison term, if convicted on the conspiracy charge. Metheny also faces potential 20 year terms on some of the other charges.

The 2008 crash killed seven firefighters from Oregon, the pilot, also from Oregon, and a Forest Service inspector pilot from California. Four other Oregonians were injured in one of the nation's worst firefighting air crashes.

As the Sikorsky S-61N tried to take off at 7:41 p.m. on Aug. 5, it weighed 19,008 pounds -- 3,168 more than recommended for safe flight and 563 heavier than the maximum allowable weight, investigators said. It was also 1,647 pounds heavier than the pilot thought, which affected his decision to take off as well as how to fly, officials with the National Transportation Safety Board said.

Instead of climbing up from its launch site near Weaverville, Calif., the helicopter went forward, clipped the tops of trees and crashed.

Witnesses to the air disaster on the front lines of an 83,000-acre wildfire in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest told NTSB investigators that the aircraft rose only 40 to 50 feet before going down

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-- The Associated Press

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