

Carson Helicopters official admits to defrauding feds

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The second of two Carson Helicopter Inc. officials indicted on 22 federal charges related to a 2008 helicopter crash that killed nine people admitted in federal court Monday to lying and defrauding the government about the craft's capabilities but denied the crimes contributed to the crash.

Steven Metheny, 43, of Central Point, pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in Medford to one count each of filing a false statement and of conspiracy to defraud the U.S. Forest Service by falsifying information about the performance abilities of four helicopters to gain \$20 million in firefighting

contracts.

The falsified weight and balance data supplied by Metheny and co-defendant Levi Phillips in their winning bid for a Forest Service contract included information about the Sikorsky S-61N that clipped a tree and crashed in August 2008 in Northern California while fighting the Iron 44 wildfire.

Seven of the nine killed were Southern Oregon firefighters in what was the deadliest crash of its kind in U.S. wildfire-fighting history.

Seven Iron 44 family members of some of the fallen firefighters, including Nina Charlson of Eugene, attended Monday's hearing expecting to hear Metheny admit that the scheme to defraud the Forest Service was a contributing factor in the crash.

Several of the family members left in tears when defense attorney Steve Myers specified in court that the plea agreement is no such admission.

"I didn't expect that," Charlson said as she left the courtroom.

U.S. Attorney Amanda Marshall said in a release Monday evening that defrauding the government about payload capabilities "created a reckless risk of harm to those who used the information in firefighting operations," including those in the Iron 44 crash.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Byron Chatfield said in court that the government plans to seek a stiffer than normal sentence under federal sentencing guidelines based on the crimes involving reckless risk of death or serious bodily injury.

The two charges together have a potential maximum federal prison sentence of 25 years and \$500,000 in fines. Chatfield said in court that federal

attorneys intend to seek restitution, but it was unclear Monday whether that would include restitution for the dead firefighters' families.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark D. Clarke set a March 2 sentencing date for Metheny, who remains free.

Phillips, 48, of Grants Pass, pleaded guilty to a similar charge in September 2013 and agreed to cooperate with federal authorities in Metheny's case. Metheny was scheduled to go to trial Jan. 6 and Phillips has a Feb. 2 sentencing date set.

The crash occurred on a nearly 6,000-foot-high mountaintop near Weaverville, Calif., while the Sikorsky S-61N helicopter was ferrying out firefighters battling the Iron 44 fire in the Trinity Alps Wilderness Area of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

A National Transportation Safety Board investigation showed the helicopter weighed more than 19,000 pounds when pilots tried to take off from a mountaintop clearing. If Forest Service guidelines had been followed, investigators said, the weight shouldn't have exceeded 15,840 pounds.

It concluded in 2010 that Carson's deliberate understatement of the weight of its helicopter and lapses in safety oversight caused the fatal crash.

Phillips was the company's director of maintenance, reporting directly to Metheny, a former Carson vice president.

Upon sentencing, Metheny's remaining charges will be dismissed.

A 25-page indictment against the two men says that roughly between March and October 2008, Metheny and Phillips submitted bid proposals on behalf of Carson Helicopters that contained information the two knew was false.

The bid proposals contained falsified weight and balance charts and falsely altered performance charts that were created by Phillips and submitted so the Forest Service could determine whether the helicopters met minimum contract specifications, court documents claim.

Metheny knowingly distributed the false information to pilots and in helicopter flight manuals for use in the field.

The falsified charts were then used by pilots, unaware of the false nature of the charts, in performing firefighting flight operations, including calculating the helicopter's maximum payload capacity during firefighting operations, thereby endangering the safety of the helicopters in flight, court documents state.

Those who died in the crash were: check pilot Jim Ramage, 63 of Redding, Calif.; command pilot Roark Schwanenberg, 54, of Lostine; firefighter David Steele, 19, Ashland; firefighter Shawn Blazer, 30, Medford; firefighter Scott Charlson, 25, Phoenix; firefighter Matthew Hammer, 23, Grants Pass; firefighter Edrik Gomez, 19, Ashland; firefighter Bryan Rich, 29, Medford; and firefighter Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, Cave Junction. Four others were injured.

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