

Co-conspirator gets 25 months in prison in Carson Helicopter crash case

By Mark Freeman Mail Tribune Jun 16, 2015 12:00 AM

Carson Helicopter's maintenance director was sentenced today to more than two years in federal prison for his role in lying to the Forest Service about helicopter flying capabilities that helped contribute to 2008's crash that killed nine people assigned to Northern California's Iron 44 fire.

Levi Phillips created a formula to fraudulently compute helicopter weights that didn't match the machines' true weights and carrying capacities to land the Forest Service's lucrative firefighting contracts for which the company truly would not have been qualified even to bid.

Carson Vice President Steven Metheny used Phillips' formula for computing the fake data for the helicopter that crashed on the Iron 44 fire — an airship pilots and safety experts at the scene never would have been allowed to launch if they knew the machine's true specifications, court documents state.

Phillips was sentenced in U.S. District Court in Medford about an hour after Metheny was sentenced to 12 1/2 years in prison for his role in the deadliest helicopter crash involving wildland firefighters in U.S. history.

Phillips' sentence was lesser, in part, to his cooperation with federal authorities against Metheny, and his cooperation was deemed pivotal in unraveling the conspiracy, court papers state.

After a string of friends and family testified today to what a stand-up and community guy Phillips is, U.S. District Chief Judge Ann Aiken said she was sentencing Phillips as a man who committed the crime and not the Boy Scout troop leader and family man who otherwise kept his nose clean.

Aiken told Phillips that he could have stood up and stopped Metheny in this deadly conspiracy, but acquiesced and then "put the mask of the good guy back on" at home.

"You'd be a model citizen in this community but for the egregious actions that got you here today," Aiken said.

"When did everybody become 'yes people'?" Aiken said. "Courage is a little used virtue anymore."

Phillips earlier pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire and mail fraud and his 25-month sentence today was in the middle of the 21-month to 27-month range advised under federal sentencing guidelines.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Byron Chatfield said outside of court that, though Phillips helped unravel the conspiracy, the government would have gone through with prosecuting the case but that his aid "made it much more quickly resolved."

Phillips and Metheny were each given until Aug. 17 to report to federal prison. Both requested housing in the correctional facility in Sheridan.

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