



***NEWS
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United States
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Forest Service
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Salmon-Challis National Forest to Stop Helicopter Operations at Indianola Helibase

North Fork District Ranger Russ Bacon announced today that helicopters will no longer operate at the Indianola Helibase located approximately 11 miles west of North Fork, Idaho. “Based on a recent safety review of helicopter operations at Indianola we have determined that we cannot adequately protect firefighters or the public from the hazards associated with the Salmon River Road running through the facility,” said Bacon.

In 2005, the Salmon-Challis National Forest decided to consolidate aviation operations at the Salmon Airport. This decision was based on the overall efficiency and safety of firefighting operations. The forest had originally planned on delaying the Indianola move to Salmon until the new Salmon helibase was constructed. The decision to delay the Indianola move was contingent on being able to mitigate the major hazards associated with the Salmon River Road passing through Indianola. “Despite our best efforts, including controlling traffic with road guards we are unable to ensure that helicopter operations can safely coexist with a high traffic road such as the River Road. Therefore, because firefighter and safety is our highest priority we must stop operating helicopters at Indianola,” said Bacon.

Indianola has served as a helicopter base for wildland firefighting for over 40 years. However, this facility was never constructed as a helibase. While there has never been a major accident at the facility there have been a number of near misses. These near miss accidents have included vehicles running off the road, aborted helicopter landings and close calls with firefighters and vehicles. More restrictive helibase standards have also made it very difficult to effectively base a helicopter at Indianola. Some standards that can not be met at Indianola include a requirement to have a 75 foot safety circle free of obstacles around helipads as well as Department of Homeland Security requirement to build a fence that will ensure that aircraft are secured. Neither of these requirements can

be met because of the limited space around the helicopters and the proximity of the Salmon River Road.

The Salmon-Challis is fully prepared to effectively respond to wildfires on the North Fork District using all of its available resources. “We have put a lot of thought into how we will respond to wildfires now that our aircraft will be based in Salmon”, said Bacon. “Response plans will include pre-positioning aircraft at our satellite helipads such as Cadegan, Cove Creek and Hughes Creek. Real-time lightning maps, lookouts, fixed wing aircraft and up to the minute weather forecasts allow us to be much more efficient at positioning our firefighting assets across the forest.”

The North Fork Ranger District will also be stationing a 10 person work crew at Indianola this summer. This crew will consist of qualified firefighters who will be able to respond to wildfire incidents when they are in the area. They will also be assigned to trail and fuels reduction work throughout the northern part of the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

“I recognize that Indianola has been a part of the downriver culture for a century, it’s a fixture that we are all very attached to. That attachment can’t cloud our judgment when it comes to the safety of our firefighters or the public. Indianola is only 12 minute’s flight time from the Salmon Airport and we remain committed to quickly responding to wildfires on the North Fork Ranger District.” said Bacon.

For any additional information please call Kent Fuellenbach, Public Affairs Officer at 756-5145.

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