

The Manager's Approach



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Columbia & Pine Mountain Lake Airports

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Knight Fire Helibase

On July 26th a wildfire broke out in the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus River canyon. This canyon is so steep that air tankers could not effectively fight the fire so large helicopters were called in to assist. The fire was on Stanislaus Forest land so the Forest Service took over the responsibility for the fire and created a helibase along the grass runway at Columbia Airport. At the peak of the fire fighting effort there were eight helicopters operating out of the temporary helibase. This included four Erickson Air Cranes, two Bell Hueys, a Kmax, and a Cobra.

The Air Cranes have the ability to carry over 2,000 gallons of water including the ability to load water from rivers, ponds, lakes, reservoirs and portable retardant tanks. One Air Crane crew mentioned that they dumped over 52,000 gallons of water on the Knight Fire in a single eight hour shift. One drawback of the Air Cranes is that they are so big they cannot operate at the bottom of a narrow canyon because they do not have the rotor clearance.

Helicopters like Kmax and the Hueys are great bucket aircraft. Having the water bucket on the end of a long cable allows them to fill their buckets in all but the narrowest canyons. Thus their turn-around time is much quicker, even though they carry less water than the Air Cranes.

One unique fire fighting helicopter used on the Knight fire was the Cobra. The one at the Columbia helibase was one of two that the Forest Service owns. Originally a Vietnam era gunship, this helicopter was converted to a camera ship which carries an infrared camera capable of locating hot spots

hidden in the wildfire smoke. Real-time images can be transmitted to fire fighters on the ground or to the command center through a microwave transmitter onboard the helicopter. The Cobra generally went out in the morning and evening gathering images of the fire for use in assessing the movement of the fire during the night, for planning that days fire fighting effort, and assessing the progress at the end of the day.

The operation of the helibase did require that the grass runway be closed, but there was not a single complaint because the local pilots understood the need to make fighting wildfires the airport's top priority.



Airports Lose Caltrans Annual Credit Grant for FY09/10

Most small airports in California receive an Annual Credit Grant from Caltrans Division of Aeronautics in the amount of \$10,000. These annual grants can significantly help small airports because the grants often constitute a significant portion of an airport's annual revenue. This year the California Legislature chose to suspend all Division of Aeronautics grants including the Annual Credit Grant, all Acquisition and Development Grants, and all FAA Airport Improvement Project Matching Grants as a part of the overall effort to balance the

State's budget. In all, this amounts to about \$4 million which has been diverted from the Division of Aeronautics to the State's General Fund.

Losing \$20,000 in revenue to the Airports Department is very significant because it amounts to about 4.5% of our overall revenue. For Columbia Airport, the loss of the Annual Credit Grant amounts to about 2.5% of the annual revenue, but for Pine Mountain Lake it represents about 20% of the annual revenue.

It is important for everyone to understand that this fiscal year is going to be very lean for our airports. Let's hope this loss of the Annual Credit Grant ends up being a one time occurrence and does not happen in future years.

Noise Sensitive Areas

As a reminder to our local pilots, we have several noise sensitive areas near our airports. Maps showing these areas are posted at both airports. Please be neighborly and avoid these areas.

Hangar Project Update

There have been numerous inquiries to the Airports office from pilots wanting to know the status of the new hangar construction. I can say that progress is being made and both the Columbia Airport and the Pine Mountain Lake Airport projects are steadily moving forward. Grading permit applications have been submitted to the Community Development Department, and the Developer has been working with PG&E, Tuolumne Utilities District, and Groveland Community Services, to work out the details of power and water connections at both airports. The current schedule calls for construction to begin this fall with completion next spring or early summer.

Detailed information regarding the new hangars including the size, location and current lease rates can be found at the developer's website www.legacyad.net and then clicking "Projects" then "California".

Stupid Pilot Tricks

Fire Fighting Aircraft Have the Right of Way

During the Knight Fire Columbia Airport was turned into a helibase with as many as eight fire fighting helicopters operating on one day. In addition to the helibase, the CAL FIRE Tanker Base was also busy operating their Air Attack OV-10 Bronco, their two S-2T Air Tankers and the Helitack 404. If this wasn't enough, Courtney Aviation was called to service to provide Air Attack services and two contract Beechcraft King Airs were flown as lead aircraft. My rough count was that there were around 16 aircraft all fighting the Knight Fire, although not all at one time. The fire was only 11 miles from Columbia Airport making for a lot of traffic pattern activity.

All pilots should know that emergency response aircraft have the right-of-way and that they may be using any and all of Columbia's runways. Air Attack, and lead aircraft generally take off and land on Runway 17, Air Tankers take off on Runway 17 land Runway 35, helicopters at the helibase were using either Runway 11 or Runway 29. I know this can be very confusing to pilots unfamiliar with Columbia Airport and especially those that are not familiar with fire fighting aircraft operations.

During the entire fire fighting operation we only had one incident that caused us concern. A pilot had a broken headset jack that prevented him from hearing the UNICOM radio broadcasts. Once the pilot realized he had a broken audio system he grounded himself and his aircraft until after the fire fighting aircraft activity was over.

The Manager's Approach is a monthly publication from the Tuolumne County Airports Director for the purpose of keeping our community informed of local aviation and airport issues. You can contact me at:

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