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On July 10, 2018 firefighters from the Oregon Department of Forestry-Northeast Oregon District and Bureau of Indian Affairs, Umatilla Agency, gathered near Meacham, Oregon for a unique training opportunity with the Oregon National Guard. 30 firefighters were on scene to participate in an interagency training session with Guard members using their Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopter, a large helicopter used for transporting water during wildfire suppression activities.

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) may request the Oregon National Guard when other firefighting assets in Oregon are depleted. Because of the uniqueness of their duty, aerial assets are often some of first resources ODF orders. While use of these resources isn't uncommon, many firefighters never have the chance to train with them.

Participants at the Northeast Oregon District training day were offered the chance to communicate directly with the helicopters to practice requesting bucket drops with the large water delivery systems. This training afforded pilots, flight crews and firefighters the opportunity to gain experience and understanding of each of the differing agencies capabilities under a controlled and simulated conditions.

During the 14 drops performed during training, the Oregon National Guard pilots worked with on-scene Aerial Tactical Group Supervisors (ATGS) to receive mission information. Firefighters in turn practiced making radio contact with the pilots, guiding them to where water drops were needed, just as they would on a wildfire incident. On hand to assist firefighters were trainers who provided tips on how to briefly communicate critical information to pilots so they could hit targeted “hotspots.”

This training was an excellent representation of the value of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy and the tenant of improving wildfire response. The experience gained by participating in the exercise helped firefighters and guard members prepare for working together and supporting each other during wildfire incidents.

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