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Red Lake Reservation, located in the northern reaches of Minnesota, is home to the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians. In May 2018, the Red Lake Helitack module assisted the Tribe with completing a 41,000 acre vegetation management project designed to thin the forest understory and restore the forest ecosystem.

Because the project area was remote with limited access, the Red Lake Helitack crew was largely used to aerially ignite and monitor the prescribed fire. Helitack personnel flew a total of eight hours using a Red Dragon Plastic Sphere Dispenser (PSD) machine that was installed in the helicopter. They also assisted with monitoring the prescribed fire as firefighters operating a utility vehicle ignited from roadways and trails.

The timing of this large project was important to ensure the prescribed fire effectively removed the grass understory, but did not burn the timbered over story. To accomplish this, firefighters chose to conduct the prescribed fire during the spring, shortly after the snow melted from the grassy fields, but before it could melt from the shaded timber. This meant working in 30 degree temperatures, adding an additional layer of complexity as they were competing with icy conditions.

The project involved 20 firefighters and took 24 hours to complete. Despite the cold and added logistical challenges, firefighters successfully completed the prescribed fire which will help the Tribe maintain a healthy forest ecosystem.

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