



Colorado State Forest Service
5060 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-5060
970.491.6303; FAX 970.491.7736
<http://csfs.colostate.edu/>

NEWS

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Contact for Reporters: Donna Davis

719.384.9087

donna.davis@colostate.edu

Colorado State Forest Service Qualifies Area Firefighters to Work with Air Tankers

LA JUNTA, Colo. — The Colorado State Forest Service and La Junta Fire Department together hosted a safety training workshop this week to qualify area firefighters to work with single-engine wildfire suppression aircraft.

The crew for a CSFS single-engine air tanker (SEAT), headed by SEAT Manager Clinton Bellingar, led the training workshop at the La Junta Municipal Airport Tuesday, which included CSFS pilot Charlie Miller making a demonstration water drop in a field north of the airport. Approximately 30 firefighters from the La Junta, Ordway, Holly and Prowers County Rural fire departments are now qualified to safely load a SEAT with water or flame retardant after receiving their Interagency SEAT Loader Data Card, also known as a “Blue Card.”

“We’re excited to train La Junta and surrounding area firefighters in safe aircraft operations, and to give our fire departments first-hand information about Colorado State Forest Service SEAT aircraft and their potential use in wildfire situations,” said Donna Davis, La Junta District forester for the CSFS. Davis coordinated the workshop and served as one of the instructors.

Blue Card training prepares firefighters to communicate via radio with SEAT pilots and crews, safely maneuver around aircraft on the ground and properly refill an aircraft’s water tanks. The training Tuesday also focused on air support tactics for fire situations specific to southeast Colorado, such as community interface, riparian and prairie fires.

“Air drops when life, property and other values are at risk are important tools to have in the fire suppression tool kit,” Davis said. “An air drop during initial attack may potentially keep a small fire small – allowing responders to maintain a handle on the situation. A drop can also allow a little more time for resources to arrive at a fire.”

Davis said that keeping a fire smaller using SEATs can help keep overall suppression costs down and free up resources for other fires in a jurisdiction.

The CSFS has two full-time SEATs, which are moved around the state each fire season with changing conditions, and can bring on SEATs from other parts of the country when fire activity increases. SEATs

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can drop up to 800 gallons of water, foam or retardant onto wildfires while flying 100 mph just 60 feet over the terrain.

Both CSFS SEATs were just relocated at the La Plata County Airport, but La Junta Municipal Airport has an agreement with the CSFS for potential airport use during an emergency.

“Thank you to the La Junta Fire Department and the City of La Junta for hosting this event. If a SEAT is ever needed in southeastern Colorado, the firefighters are ready to support this asset,” Davis said.

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