

## **Alaska Fire Service Emergency Fire Fighter (EFF) Helicopter Crewmember Program**

Alaska Fire Service (AFS) first started sponsoring the EFF Helicopter Crewmember (HECM) program in the late 90's with two main goals in mind. One was to create a new career path for native Alaskans in wildland fire and the other was to allow the Fire Specialists to concentrate on other fire qualifications. During the early years of the training program the focus was on training EFF firefighters at the basic entry level of fire aviation and by the early mid 2000's there was a focus shift on advancing EFF HECM's qualifications into other aviation qualifications such as Airbase Radio Operator (ABRO), Take Off and Landing Coordinator (TOLC), Deck Coordinator (DECK) and Helicopter Manager (HMGB). However the latter was dropped by 2006 due authority issues with EFF managing exclusive use helicopters.

The training program was initially developed with multiple years of training for prospective individuals, however by the mid 2000's there was a shift in the training schedule due to the lack of a large number of returning individuals. The program was redesigned to be a two-year training program with the first year being two weeks long and consisting of the S-271 Basic Helicopter Crewmember course, S-212 Wildfire Power Saws, basic leadership training followed by various field exercises involving helicopter operations (building external cargo load nets, long line hook-up, passenger briefings, helispot construction etc.)

After the completion of the two-week training, the individuals would return home and be available for fire assignments throughout the remainder of the year and go out on assignments and work on completing their HECM taskbook.

The second year that the individuals are involved in the training program they attend a week long training session that focuses on more aviation training such as S-270 Basic Air Operations, S-131 Advanced Firefighter/Squad Boss training, and multiple field exercises consisting of field navigation (Compass and GPS), radio programming and communication skills, and exposure to other helicopter aviation roles with a simulated helibase activation. At the end of the week session there is a field day working with a helicopter to reinforce skills learned from the previous year.

One other focus on training in the second year is developing self-leadership skills. Prior to coming into the training program the EFF HECM's fire experience is working on handcrews. The intent of this training is to develop self-discipline and initiative when working independently from the EFF HECM's immediate leader.

After the completion of the second year of training, the EFF HECM's return home and await assignments for fires. It is the desire that the EFF HECM's go on enough assignments during their first year of training, obtain their HECM qualification, and if they are unable then complete the qualification during the second year in the program.

The EFF HECM's come from the three AFS fire zones (Upper Yukon, Tanana, and Galena zones) and remains under their dispatch control and authority. The zones also have responsibility to hire, dispatch, outfit with the proper personnel protective equipment (PPE), and certify each EFF HECM in their zones.

As of 2010 there have been three training cycles and more than 12 EFF HECM's have been produced, increasing the number of HECM's that are always need in managing helicopter aviation operations on wildland fires primarily in Alaska but also in the Lower-48 states.