



United States Wildland Fire Service  
& United States Forest Service

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| Date:     | 07/30/2026                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Route To: | Christopher Wilcox, United States Wildland Fire Service (USWFS), Designated Agency Safety and Health Official<br>Sarah Fisher, Deputy Chief for Fire and Aviation Management, United States Forest Service (USFS) |
|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Subject:  | <b>Serious Accident Investigation Team (SAIT) Update #1</b>                                                                                                                                                       |

**THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS PRELIMINARY AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

A Serious Accident Investigation Team (SAIT), jointly led by USWFS and USFS and comprised entirely of wildland fire subject matter experts, continues its review of the June 27, 2026, entrapment incident involving the Rifle Interagency Helitack Crew on the Gore and Knowles Fires. This update provides verified information from preliminary reports, dispatch records, lightning data, photos, satellite imagery, and initial fire behavior observations. It offers clarity to firefighters and families while the full investigation remains ongoing under deliberative process privileges.

**Key Established Facts**

- **Incident Overview:** On June 27, 2026, at approximately 1519, members of the Rifle Interagency Helitack Crew (USWFS and USFS personnel) were involved in an entrapment while engaged in initial attack on the Gore and Knowles Fires, southwest of Loma, Colorado. Five firefighters deployed fire shelters. Firefighters Emily Barker, Nick Hutcherson, and Sydney Watson did not survive. Two others were evacuated with burn injuries. On July 24, 2026, as a result of his injuries, Nathan Matthews passed away. The other firefighter continues to recover from his injuries.
- **Firefighter Insertion:** The initial load of Rifle Helitack crew was inserted on the Knowles Fire earlier that day (staffed at 0936). The Knowles and Gore Fires were located approximately 8 miles east of two additional initial attack fires referred to as the Snyder and Jones Fires.
- **Ignitions and Fire Growth:** At 1232, a new ignition was detected approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile northeast of the Snyder fire and began exhibiting extreme fire behavior. Satellite imagery confirms this fire was a lightning ignition; however, during operations it was believed to be a spot fire from the Snyder Fire.
- **Rapid Fire Behavior:** Extreme conditions included very low fuel moistures, high Energy Release Component and Burning Index (94th–99th percentiles), strong west-southwest

winds (30–50+ mph with terrain-enhanced effects and a southward shift), and dry fuels. Sustained high rates of spread continued through the afternoon. As fire rapidly moved across the terrain, the new start eventually merged with the Snyder and Jones Fires and was then referred to as the Snyder Fire. Strong winds kept the smoke at ground level, reducing visibility to near zero at the deployment site.

- **Deployment Timeline Context:** Below is a table of key events in the Knowles Fire entrapment.

|           |                                                 |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 0936      | Knowles Fire initial staffing.                  |
| 1232–1300 | New start reported and growing.                 |
| 1456      | Communication about helicopter pickup.          |
| 1458      | Crew reports fire near their location.          |
| 1508      | Helicopter enroute to pick crew, ETE 5 minutes. |
| 1519      | Helicopter unable to land due to smoke.         |
|           | Fire shelter deployment.                        |

Site evidence shows final fire impact came from the southwest.

**Ongoing Investigation:** The SAIT continues to examine all aspects of the incident. This synopsis provides only verified preliminary facts and does not represent final findings or conclusions. Further details will be shared as appropriate once the full report is complete.

Our focus remains on supporting the families, survivors, and the wildland fire community. The dedication of these firefighters is remembered and honored.

/s/

cc: Thomas Heinlein, Bureau of Land Management - Colorado  
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