

Air tankers fly south for fires

**By Michael Moore Missoulian**

MISSOULA - It may be winter here in Montana, but it's fire season down south in Texas and Oklahoma.

And that has the folks at Neptune Aviation busier than you might imagine. Two Neptune tankers are already on the scene of the wildfires that have killed four people in Texas, one in Oklahoma and destroyed nearly 200 homes in the two states.

A third tanker left Missoula on Friday, bound for Fort Smith, Texas.

"It's a little out of the ordinary for us, but we do sometimes have planes going to California in the winter," said Jennifer Paisley, vice president at Neptune.

The tankers are being used to help fight flames that have burned thousands of acres across Texas and Oklahoma. Most of the fires were human-caused, and the death toll has been unusual for U.S. wildfires.

The working-class town of Cross Plains, Texas, about 115 miles west of Fort Worth, lost two residents and more than 90 homes as fire raged through the town Tuesday.

Fire crews had some limited success against the fires Thursday and Friday, and National Weather Service forecasters were predicting a return to warm, windy weather by today, with little chance of rain.

The Neptune tankers were dispatched by the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. Gary Boyd, assistant manager for the Northern Rockies Coordination Center, said the national center has been dispatching crews and equipment for the fires.

"So far, they haven't really needed much from us other than a couple of helicopter managers from Bozeman," Boyd said. "Usually they send people out of the Southwest to the fires down in that area."

Although Paisley said her company's planes haven't historically seen much duty in the winter months, Boyd said the fire season is really just heating up for the mid-South.

"This is a hair early, but this is the southern area's fire season. They didn't have much of a season last year, but it's looking pretty significant this year."

Paisley said the Neptune planes fly out of Missoula with a captain and a first officer, and barring quick improvement in the fire situation down South, those crew members will be spending New Year's on the job.

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