



# PNWCG Interagency Aviation Safety Alert

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**Subject:** Aircraft Operations in Poor Visibility  
**Area of Concern:** Wildland Fire Aviation Operations  
**Distribution:** All Fire and Aviation Operations

## Discussion:

Throughout the Pacific Northwest geographic area, there have been a number of reports where aircraft have been dispatched to fires only to find that they do not have adequate visibility to safely operate due to poor visibility conditions (smoke). A leadplane, airtanker, air attack, Helicopter Coordinator (HLCO), or helicopter pilot in the low level environment cannot see as far horizontally through the smoke layer which is extremely hazardous when operating aircraft at a fast forward airspeed. It is critical that all aviation resources have adequate horizontal and vertical visibility to operate safely.

## Key Points:

- When poor visibility is reported or suspected, aircraft should not be dispatched to an incident or fire unless adequate en route, horizontal and vertical visibility in the low-level environment is verified.
- Pilots should not attempt to fly if the visibility and surrounding terrain present an unsafe working environment. As an alternative, pilots may work with aerial supervision and/or ground operations personnel on a different part of the fire with better visibility.
- If an initial attack qualified airtanker pilot is on-scene when horizontal or vertical visibility suddenly deteriorates, the airtanker pilot is authorized to request a leadplane.
- If necessary, an airtanker pilot may need to jettison the load and return to an airtanker base until a leadplane is dispatched or confirmed on scene.
- Costly and inefficient actions like this can be avoided if visibility can be assessed and determined to be adequate prior to dispatching the airtanker.
- The visibility verification may be made by a leadplane, Aerial Supervision Module (ASM), HLCO, or by an Air Attack Group Supervisor (ATGS) who can receive input from pilots currently working at low altitude. In all cases, the pilot in command shall retain the final authority regarding when conditions are safe or not safe to perform any assigned operation.
- Due to smoky conditions, the availability of aircraft (i.e. extraction helicopters) may be delayed or not available. Plan accordingly with operations, plans, safety, and medical units.

## Helicopter Flight Visibility Requirements:

[Interagency Helicopter Operations Guide](#) (Does not apply to smoky conditions but has some relevance to the topic).

- *Day Visual Flight Rules (VFR) Only.*
- *Except as noted below, or for reasons of life-or-death emergency, single-engine helicopters shall be limited to flight during daylight hours and only under VFR conditions (minimum ½ mile visibility).*

## Fixed-Wing Flight Visibility Requirements:

- [Federal Aviation Regulations](#), Part 91.151

*/s/ Aaron Schoolcraft*

**Aaron Schoolcraft**

PNWCG, Aviation Committee Chair

*/s/ Shad Sitz*

**Shad Sitz**

PNWCG, Aviation Committee Co-Chair