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(Regional)-Report Released On Plane Crash During Summer Fires

By: Jeremy Anderson Posted at: 11/14/2012 01:55 PM

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) - Four crewmembers aboard a North Carolina Air National Guard plane fighting Western wildfires were killed last summer because the crew misjudged conditions and flew into a wind burst that slammed them to the ground, an Air Force crash report says.

The C-130 Hercules air tanker fighting a wildfire in the South Dakota Black Hills crashed July 1. The accident investigation report released Wednesday by the Air Force Air Mobility Command says it happened because the crew made an "inadequate assessment" of conditions and it flew into a microburst.

A microburst is a narrow wind gust that rushes downward out of a thunderstorm. A plane flying through it at low altitude can quickly lose the lift that keeps it aloft. A microburst is typically less than 2.5 miles in diameter and lasts for less than 5 minutes, the report says.

Four of the six crew members from a North Carolina Air National Guard unit died in the crash. Two crewmen were injured.

The report says two other plane crews on the scene failed to communicate critical information and the C-130's crew also received conflicting information on avoiding a thunderstorm.

The North Carolina Air National Guard said in a statement it would study the accident investigation's findings to prevent future tragedies.

The four who died were Lt. Col. Paul K. Mikeal (MY-kuhl), 42, of Mooresville; Maj. Joseph M. McCormick, 36, of Belmont; Maj. Ryan S. David (dah-VEED), 35, of Boone, and Senior Master Sgt. Robert S. Cannon, 50, of Charlotte.

They were members of the Air National Guard's 145th Air Wing, which was pressed into service to fight wildfires that burned thousands of acres and destroyed hundreds of homes in Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota. Their aircraft was flying out of Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., at the time of the crash.

The plane was assigned to a wildfire that scorched 14 square miles near Edgemont, S.D. The blaze burned 14 square miles before it was contained with the help of rain. The burned lands were primarily National Forest grasslands and timber, although some ranchers were affected.

The Charlotte-based unit sent three C-130s and 36 men on the firefighting assignment but cut the mission short after the crash.

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