

# HELICOPTERS: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON FIRE INVESTIGATIONS

KEN SWAN, MESC-CFEI, CVFI, CFEI  
FIRE AND EXPLOSION INVESTIGATOR & WESTERN CANADA MANAGER

Even on the smallest of scales, locating the origin and cause of a fire can be complicated. Now imagine that it is early spring and a fire has raged through a mine in a remote part of northern Alberta, where the only route to the scene is still somewhat frozen. Difficult does not begin to describe the task. Not only are you faced with an enormous area that will take days to comb, but accessing the location is often near impossible. In such situations, a helicopter can contribute enormously to an investigation. >>>

An aerial search is worth the cost, and, in some cases, is the only option. There are four very good reasons that justify using a helicopter in a fire investigation. From perspective, to time, to safety, to logistics, helicopters can give you a soaring advantage.

## 1) AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE SCENE



A picture is worth a thousand words, but when it is used to gather intel on a fire, it can be key to the success of an investigation.

Fire experts know that if you can get an aerial view of a fire scene, you can identify patterns and uncover previously hidden evidence. It also ensures that you are accurately preserving the scene while presenting a real time perspective.

### BUT HOW DO FIRE EXPERTS OBTAIN THIS EXTREMELY BENEFICIAL BIRD'S-EYE-VIEW?

Climbing up on a rooftop. Standing on a hill. Using the fire department's aerial apparatus.

All are examples of lower-cost means of obtaining an aerial photo, but have limitations. While it is the most expensive option, a helicopter is the ideal choice. Charges typically

include air-time and fuel, however, the exact rate depends on the type of helicopter. While the cost may seem high, there are many different types of helicopters to choose from, including smaller, two-seaters that are very economical.

## 2) TIME

Helicopters are also beneficial when time is a factor. Large parts of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario are inaccessible due to large swamps and lakes. A helicopter circumvents these obstacles, reduces travel time and allows you to land at the scene, and start investigating the origin of the fire within minutes.

In the case of large grass fires, a few photographs taken from the air can replace days spent walking the scene and taking and stitching together photographs into a cohesive photo journal, which may end up costing the same as a helicopter ride.

## 3) EVIDENCE COLLECTION & SAFETY



If you are looking to collect evidence from a post-fire site, helicopters can carry much more than traditional forms of transportation. If you have to hike to the scene and leave the vehicle behind, you will not be able to carry much evidence. Snowmobiles, unless equipped with sleds, are also limiting. Helicopters have the cargo room you need to transport evidence from massive scenes.

They also protect you against the elements. Arriving at a scene after a saturating boat ride in the middle of fall is not ideal. And if someone gets injured or becomes ill at a remote site, a helicopter can quickly get them to safety.



#### 4) REMOTE ACCESS

Using helicopters to gain visual access to large buildings in remote areas or in dangerous circumstances is not only safe, but sometimes absolutely necessary. Driving to fire scenes at fishing and hunting lodges is almost impossible. During the fall freeze-up and spring thaw, boats and snowmobiles cannot reach scenes across water. Helicopters can hover without landing, drop you near or at your destination, and land close by.

While helicopter rentals are expensive—estimated between \$1,000 - \$1,500 per hour, including fuel—you can recoup some of the cost in man hours, as well as driving, hotel, and meal costs. To put it in perspective, a helicopter can roughly cover the distance of a four hour drive in one hour. Costs can further be reduced if multiple parties agree to split the cost of the helicopter.

Helicopters are not necessary for every fire, but when the terrain is tricky or the scene is immense, they are extremely beneficial. When considering a helicopter for your investigation, collect multiple quotes and weigh the cost against what you will save in time and manpower. You may be surprised with how your perspective on them will change.



#### KEN SWAN,

Fire and Explosion Investigator  
Western Canada Manager  
MESC-CFEI, CVFI, CFEI

Accepted as an expert witness in criminal and civil courts and in arbitration hearings, Ken specializes in structural fires and explosions. He has conducted more than 1,900 fire and explosion investigations, and has participated in over 150 tests relating to fire investigation and fire and smoke migration. His professional experience includes 21 years as a police officer, 10 years with the Office of the Fire Commissioner of Manitoba and 15 years with the St. Andrews Fire Department.



1 888 624 3473



INFO@ORIGIN-AND-CAUSE.COM