

# NEWS RELEASE

CAL FIRE SAN LUIS OBISPO UNIT

Unit Chief  
John Owens



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## NIGHT FLYING HELITANKER RETURNS TO SLO COUNTY FOR 2026 PEAK FIRE SEASON

**Paso Robles, CA** – Firefighters in San Luis Obispo County have an important new tool available for wildfire response as a CH-47D Chinook helitanker arrives at the Paso Robles Air Attack Base under an exclusive-use contract for the 2026 fire season.

The aircraft, designated Helitanker 7PJ, is the same Chinook that supported local firefighting operations last year. The helicopter's unique nighttime firefighting capabilities allow it to operate during hours when many other aircraft are unavailable, providing critical aerial support during periods of increased fire activity.

Helitanker 7PJ will typically be staffed and available from 3:00 p.m. until 3:00 a.m. each day, allowing crews to take advantage of both afternoon fire suppression operations and nighttime firefighting missions. Its speed, capacity, and night-flying capabilities provide firefighters with another powerful resource to help protect lives, property, and natural resources.

*"7PJ is a welcome addition to the aerial response we have in the San Luis Obispo Unit and will also be utilized statewide as large incidents emerge,"* said Cody Dunn, Battalion Chief assigned to the Paso Robles Air Attack Base.

The CH-47D Chinook can cruise at speeds of up to 120 knots (138 mph) and carry up to 2,300 gallons of water per drop. This combination of speed and payload enables the aircraft to respond rapidly to emerging incidents and deliver substantial water drops to support firefighters on the ground.

Residents may see the aircraft responding to initial attack incidents throughout San Luis Obispo County and other areas of California when needed for larger fires.

Night-flying aircraft have become an increasingly important component of California's wildfire suppression strategy, allowing firefighting operations to continue after sunset, when cooler temperatures, higher humidity, and reduced fire behavior can create favorable conditions for containment.

The arrival of Helitanker 7PJ further strengthens the county's aerial firefighting capabilities as agencies prepare for the peak of the 2026 wildfire season.

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