

Member Agencies Assist in Boosting Firefighting Air Power

For firefighting helicopters, the fewer minutes between a water source and wildfire is the difference between successful containment and an explosive catastrophe threatening homes and possibly lives. Several ACWA member agencies are helping make that difference an advantage for firefighters by establishing water refill dip sites beside their treatment and storage facilities.

In July, a dip site beside SCV Water's E. G. "Jerry" Gladbach Water Treatment Plant was the primary source for helicopters fighting a 77-acre wildfire near Santa Clarita. The site employed what's known as a HeloPod, installed through a partnership between SCV Water and the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Additionally, Santa Margarita Water District and Moulton Niguel Water District have recently assisted the Orange County Fire Authority in activating

HeloPods by extending hydrants to the dip sites.

Manufactured by PumpPodUSA, an ACWA Associate, HeloPods can hold 3,700 up to 8,200 gallons of water and feature fill valves that allow for automatically refilling from a nearby water source, such as a storage tank. Helicopters hover above and lower a snorkel, which can fill their tanks within minutes.

Most HeloPods have been installed for strategic, long-term placement in anticipation of fires. They can also be re-positioned closer to a fire on a trailer. HeloPods can be remotely activated by phone or through the internet.

The concept isn't new. For years, firefighting helicopters sucked water out of orange and black vinyl "pumpkins." That solved the problem of getting water sources for helicopters closer to fires, but they frequently became unstable with

propwash from heavier duty helicopters, and snorkels occasionally punctured vinyl bottoms. Metal HeloPods evolved as a solution over the past few years, with the true value measured in time saved.

"The closer they are to the communities, the shorter the dip to drop cycle, which means more gallons of water dropped on the flames per hour and best use of fuel. And in rural and remote areas, helping to keep them close by to protect the evacuation routes," said Bill Ward, Vice President and Co-Owner of PumpPodUSA.

For firefighters, that's a game changer in wildfire-urban interface areas.

Vallecitos Water District (VWD), the City of San Marcos, and CAL FIRE recently collaborated on placing a HeloPod next to VWD's water storage tank. The 5,000-gallon HeloPod is controlled through the district's SCADA system

and can be filled within five minutes on average, according to the district. City of San Marcos Fire Department Fire Marshal and Battalion Chief Jason Nailon credits HeloPods as providing a previously unavailable water source within a vulnerable wildfire-urban interface area.

“The joint effort between CAL FIRE, Vallecitos and the San Marcos Fire Department was pivotal in bringing this project to fruition,” Nailon stated via email. “Vallecitos spearheaded the development of the necessary infrastructure to make the HeloPod a reality.”

Similar to HeloPods, Heli-Hydrants serve as stationary, permanent water sources for air attacks on wildfires.

The Rainbow Municipal Water District (RMWD) pioneered this approach

through its Rapid Area Water Supply project. Built in 2021, it consists of a 5,000-gallon open-top tank backed up by a five-million-gallon storage tank with inlet and drain valves that can be opened or closed from an in-bound helicopter. It was the first project of its kind in San Diego County. It has yet to be used, but that doesn’t lessen its value.

“Where it’s at, there’s not a lot of water sources. Unfortunately, it’s just a matter of time before it does get used,” said Robert Gutierrez, RMWD Chief Operating Officer.

Yorba Linda Water District (YLWD) supports two Heli-Hydrants. During a 2020 fire in Orange County, the YLWD’s Marc Marcantonio Heli-Hydrant supported firefighters by supplying water

to Boeing Chinook CH-47 helitankers that filled up with roughly 2,000 gallons in just under a minute, making drops on spot fires and then returning in four minutes to repeat the process, according to the district’s website.

With the 2024 fire season seriously getting underway, Heli-Hydrants and HeloPods at water districts are positioned to play a critical role. VWD celebrated its HeloPod going online in April.

“It turned out well, and it can do everything we need it to do,” said Ed Pedrazzi, VWD’s Operations and Maintenance Manager. “Knock on wood, hopefully it won’t have to be used any time soon. But the way this summer is shaping up, I wouldn’t be surprised if it will be.” ♦

Opposite page: A CAL FIRE helicopter drops water on a wildfire. A number of ACWA member agencies have established and support water sources that can save firefighting helicopter crews precious time when combatting wildfires.

Photo courtesy of PumpPodUSA, by Jeremy Ulloa @Surface 2 Air Design

Below left: A Los Angeles County Fire Department helicopter hovers over a HeloPod hosted at SCV Water to refill on water before flying back to drop on a wildfire. *Photo courtesy of PumpPodUSA, by Victor Luna, IG@p.e.s.t.o*

Below right: A CAL FIRE helicopter hovers over YLWD’s Wells Fargo Heli-Hydrant & Landing Zone. *Photo courtesy of YLWD*



Use your mobile phone’s camera to view a video of how HeloPods work, courtesy of Vallecitos Water District. You can also learn more and access other videos at www.pumppodusa.com.

