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METRO

NEWS

NEWS FROM THE PORTLAND AREA AND THE NORTHWEST

Wildfire fighter's parents file lawsuit

California crash | The suit names Carson Helicopters, Sikorsky Aircraft and two others in the death of Scott Charlson of Oregon

By **KIMBERLY A.C. WILSON**
THE OREGONIAN

The family of a firefighter, killed in a helicopter crash last month in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, filed a wrongful death suit Friday against an Oregon-based helicopter company and three other firms.

The deadliest air tragedy of

working firefighters in U.S. history, the Aug. 5 crash killed nine men, including seven contract firefighters with Grayback Forestry of Merlin, Ore.

Attorneys for the family of Scott Charlson, a 25-year-old Southern Oregon University student from Phoenix, Ore., said they plan to meet today

with relatives of five other crash victims.

"We have been contacted by other families," said San Diego aviation attorney James Frantz, although he declined to say which families, if any, are interested in joining the lawsuit. Multiple settlement offers from some of the companies have been rejected, he said.

"We really look forward to discovering who is at fault for this crash."

Charlson's parents, Richard and Nina Charlson, filed the suit in California Superior Court in Shasta County against Carson Helicopters Inc. of Grants Pass, Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. — the manufacturer of the helicopter that crashed — United Technologies Corp. and General Electric.

Grayback was not named in the suit.

Richard Charlson said his family has its "good days and

bad days" in coping with his eldest son's death.

"We lost a companion, a friend, someone who was just starting out in life and looked like he had great potential, someone everyone enjoyed being with. That's a huge loss," Charlson said. "If there was negligence ... and if nobody has fixed that and my son died for nothing, I am really going to be angry."

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Helicopter: Lawyers say crash sounds like others

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The helicopter went down shortly before sundown, just moments after lifting off. A preliminary report by the National Transportation Safety Board determined the helicopter lost power to its main rotor as it took off.

Also killed were: veteran pilot Roark Schwanenberg, 54, of Lostine; U.S. Forest Service helicopter inspector pilot Jim Ramage, 63, of Redding, Calif.; and Grayback firefighters Shawn Blazer, 30, of Medford; Matthew Hammer, 23, of Grants Pass; Edrik Gomez, 19, of Ashland; Bryan Rich, 29, of Medford; Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, of Cave Junction; and David Steele, 19, of Ashland.

Four men survived: Rick Schroeder, 42, and Jonathan Frohreich, 18, both of Medford; Michael Brown, 20, of Rogue River; and William Coultas, 44, of Cave Junction.

Attorneys who have battled the helicopter's manufacturer in court say the circumstances sound similar to four other crashes that killed or seriously injured West Coast logging pilots flying Sikorsky S-61 helicopters in recent years.

In all four cases, the helicopters crashed as they were lifting off, caused by a failure of a clutch mechanism that connects engines to the helicopter's main rotors, attorneys for the pilots and their families have successfully argued in courts in Oregon, Tennessee and British Columbia.

The pattern is the same, said San Francisco attorney Gerald Sterns, who filed two of those suits.

Carson Helicopters, which was contracted by the U.S. Forest Service for the 83,000-acre Iron Alps Complex series of

suits, who filed two of those suits.

Carson Helicopters, which was contracted by the U.S. Forest Service for the 83,000-acre Iron Alps Complex series of wildfires where the crash occurred, had not received the "Iron 44" lawsuit Friday and declined to comment on it.

But in a news release, Andy Mills, Carson's director of helicopter operations, addressed speculation that transmission parts blamed in some previous S-61 helicopter crashes may have contributed to the Shasta-Trinity National Forest disaster. He said the helicopter involved in the crash was equipped with a "improved and strengthened" part engineered by Carson and approved by federal safety regulators. "They are very different and much stronger than the older units blamed in some previous crashes," Mills said.

Frantz, Charlson's attorney, said the victims' families deserve to know what happened that evening, high on a remote ridge.

"There are issues about the maintenance of the aircraft, there are issues of potential mechanical defect and there may be pilot issues," he said.

Two weeks ago, a California jury awarded \$55.6 million to the families of four Marines killed in a 2004 helicopter crash at Camp Pendleton. Frantz was their attorney.

Southwest Stark Street at 10th Avenue; the Bijou Cafe and Stumptown Coffee on the east side of Southwest Third Avenue at Pine Street; and the Southpark Seafood Grill and Wine Bar on the west side of Southwest Ninth Avenue at Park Avenue.

They were announced as part of National Park(ing) Day, a nationwide event sponsored by the Trust for Public Lands to encourage awareness of how much land is devoted to car parking. The city's Bureau of Parks & Recreation provided potted trees and shrubs, and participating businesses offered benches and chairs to spruce up the bike spots.

The downtown businesses requested the corrals, even though it means loss of parking

for cars. "We believe it helps us support the Portland lifestyle," said Karin Devencenzi, Southpark's general manager.

The city is looking at more than 30 other requests, including Rogue Brewery and Voodoo Donuts, said Sarah Figliozzi, project manager for the Portland Transportation Office. Developers are interested in installing them in new construction, as well.

The city likes the idea because on-street bike parking reduces sidewalk clutter, underscores the message that biking is a valuable means of transportation and provides an eco-

"We're still working on policy — who pays for what," Figliozzi said.

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