

Missoula man among 3 killed in crash

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By MICHAEL MOORE of the Missoulian

Neptune Aviation chief pilot Gene Wahlstrom, right, is shown with pilot Terry Johnson in the company's hangar in March 2008. Wahlstrom was killed in the crash of an air tanker on Monday evening. Photo by TOM BAUER/Missoulian

The three men who died in Reno, Nev., Monday evening in the crash of an air tanker all worked for Missoula's Neptune Aviation.

The three were identified Wednesday by the Washoe County, Nev., coroner's office as 25-year-old Zachary Jake Vander Griend, of Missoula;

41-year-old Greg Gonsioroski, of Baker; and the company's chief pilot, Gene Wahlstrom, 61, of Hunstville, Utah.

Wahlstrom spent a lot of time in Missoula, but his family had its permanent home in Utah.

The men were all aboard Neptune Tanker 09 as it rumbled out of Reno-Stead Airport to drop a load of fire retardant on a small fire burning in Calaveras County, Calif. The plane, piloted by Wahlstrom, crashed shortly after taking off and experiencing fire in one of its engines.

The crash came as a stunning blow to the company and its employees.

Neptune

President Kristen Schloemer-Nicolarsen said she appreciated the care and concern shown by Missoulians toward the company over the past few days.

“We appreciate so much the support of the community,” she said. “Right now, we just need to be spending time with the families. We'll talk about everything else later.”

Wahlstrom, who joined the company in 1999, was the subject of a Missoulian story in March, shortly after Neptune's 22 pilots finished a training course in Seattle.

“This business has inherent risks,” said Wahlstrom. “You're taking an 80,000-pound plane and flying at low altitudes and low speeds of about 140 mph. You're working in mountains and around hazards of power lines, antennas and trees.”

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