



AVIATION & AEROSPACE

Mark R. Madler
(818) 316-3126 | mmadler@sfbvj.com

Helicopter Firm Finds New Revenue Fighting Fires

Pilots maneuver water buckets on 150-foot line.

By MARK R. MADLER Staff Reporter

Helinet Aviation Services LLC had a busy year in 2021 when it came to its newest service – providing helicopters to fight wild-fires.

The Van Nuys company responded to 12 different fires in seven states last year and kept its aerial firefighting team deployed for 96 straight days, said President Tom Norton.

“We have two trailers that are fully outfitted to support long-term sustained operations,” Norton said. “As we are consuming those parts, we are replenishing at a stock level so we can stay out as long as possible.”

Helinet decided in 2019 to get into aerial firefighting and started to deploy the helicopters – two UH-60 Black Hawks – in 2020 and had its first full year of activity last year.

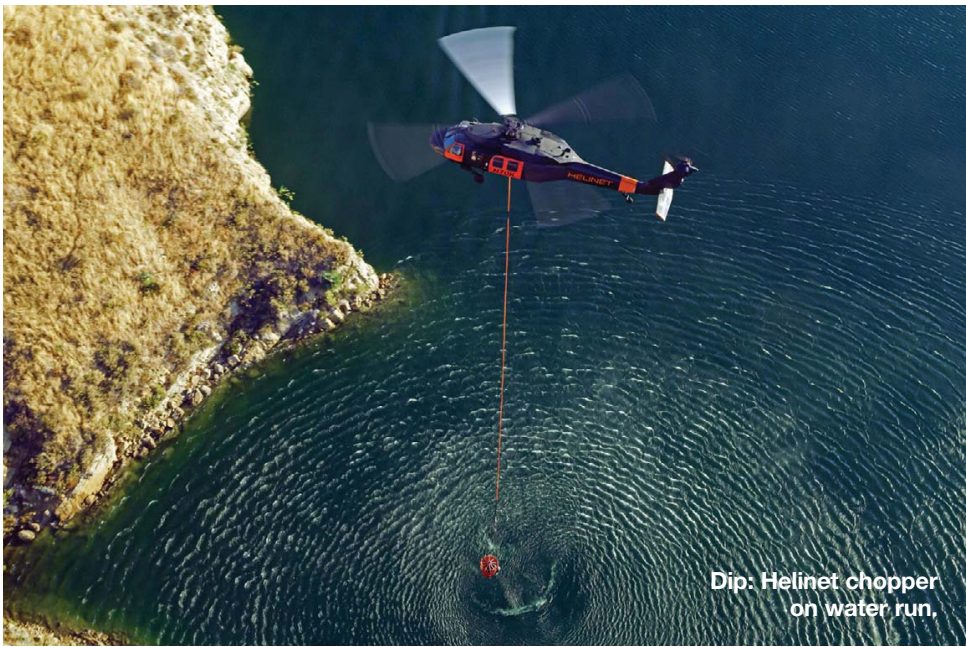
“It seemed like a good fit for us especially being in Los Angeles and given the frequency and proximity of fires,” Norton said. “We certainly have the skillset. And so it was a question outfitting and configuring the aircraft correctly.”

The company had a special window installed on the Black Hawks – a half-moon shaped observation port that sticks out from the cockpit door so that the pilot can see past the side of the aircraft.

The pilot needs to do that because, as Norton explained, “you are taking a 150-foot line with a bucket attached to it and you have to go to a water source that is directly beneath the aircraft.”

The next stage in the operation is flying to the fire and having to put the water on it. Sometimes there is reduced visibility and the pilot must fly for long hours in remote environments, Norton said.

“It is not your standard ‘I am going to



Dip: Helinet chopper on water run.

come to the office in Van Nuys and fly a charter to Santa Barbara,” he added. “It is much more demanding.”

Through Helinet’s partnership with the Black Hawk’s two private owners – Brown Helicopter Inc. in Pensacola, Fla. and Anduze Helicopter in Los Angeles – the aircraft is supported by a team of pilots, a fuel truck, back-up equipment and maintenance technicians, according to a release from the company when it got its first Black Hawk in June 2020.

Helinet contracts with Cal Fire, the state agency that protects property and lives from fires, the U.S. Forest Service and agencies in seven other states.

Last year, the company responded to the Dixie, Windy and Willow fires in California; the Pinnacle, Planet Ranch and Backbone fires in Arizona; the Sand Mountain fire in

Idaho; the Townsend and Richard Spring fires in Montana; the Jack fire in Oregon; the Parley’s Canyon fire in Utah; and the Schneider Springs fire in Washington.

“In the case of Pinnacle Fire in Arizona, they had to go out three times,” Norton said.

Alaska is the only state the company has a contract with that it did not send a helicopter to, he added.

To make sure that Helinet’s personnel and equipment can meet the demands of aerial firefighting, U.S. Forest Service performs a rigorous inspection and qualification exercise. The pilots must demonstrate the ability to operate the aircraft with the water bucket. The helicopter is inspected, and the records are reviewed to make sure both are suitable to perform the firefighting mission, Norton said.

“Some operators are not inclined to have to go through those exercises because they take

time to prepare for and it is not an insignificant amount of investment for the company to configure for a firefighting mission,” he added.

Norton declined to give an amount of what Helinet has invested in the aerial firefighting but did say from a budget standpoint he looks at both recurring and non-recurring costs.

“We look at operating costs over specific period of time and model that on a worst-case and best-case scenario,” he said.

The worst-case scenario is having the helicopters ready and waiting and not getting called to fight a fire. That means no revenue coming in to offset the costs of the salaries of standby crews and maintenance, Norton added.

The best-case scenario is just the opposite – having the helicopters ready and waiting and being called to fight a fire on behalf of agencies.

“We want to provide a stellar service to support the firefighting effort because we think it is very viable mission,” Norton said. “We want to make sure it is viable to the company.”



HELINET AVIATION SERVICES LLC

HEADQUARTERS: Van Nuys
CEO: Kathryn Purwin
BUSINESS: Helicopter services for charter, film production, law enforcement and firefighting operations
LOCATIONS: 1
EMPLOYEES: 93
NOTABLE: Responded to 12 fires in seven states last year.

Fixed-Base Operators Certified for Sustainability

Clay Lacy, Sun Air offer cleaner fuel, carbon credits.

By MARK R. MADLER Staff Reporter

Two area fixed-base operators have been certified to the new sustainability standard for aviation businesses from the National Air Transportation Association.

Clay Lacy Aviation, the long-time FBO at Van Nuys Airport, received the designation from the Washington, D.C. trade organization on Dec. 14 while Sun Air Jets received the



Green: Clay Lacy jet fills with alternative fuel.

Tier 1 designation for its Camarillo facility on the same day.

Developed by a working group under NATA’s environment committee, this industry standard is designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as CO2, increase use of more environmentally friendly energy sources, reduce waste and encourage sustainability operation-wide, Clay Lacy said in a release.

Scott Cutshall, Clay Lacy’s senior vice president of development and sustainability, said the certification is an important step in

the company’s journey toward sustainable operations.

“A lot of time and energy has been invested by NATA staff and their environmental committee to develop this standard and the tools that will help aviation businesses incorporate more sustainable practices,” Cutshall said in a statement.

Clay Lacy Aviation has in place a long-term strategic plan to operate more sustainably on both the ground and in the air. It is working on the development and use of sustainable jet

fuel and offers carbon offset programs for customers and business jet owners. The company recently installed a 500-kilowatt solar array at its Van Nuys headquarters. It is also preparing to break ground on two new facilities at Oxford-Waterbury Airport in Oxford, Conn. and John Wayne Airport in Orange County that will use sustainable construction and operational practices to reduce the environmental impact, the company said in its release.

Mary Brehm, director of business development for Sun Air Jets, said that it was an honor to work closely with the environment committee on the project and other environmental initiatives.

“Sun Air Jets is committed to further reducing the carbon footprint at their FBO and will be regularly evaluating and adjusting the baseline energy usage with a goal to achieve Tier 2 status at their next renewal,” Brehm said in a statement.

Like Clay Lacy, Sun Air offers sustainable jet fuel and carbon credits through TerraPass, a San Francisco-based company that uses the proceeds from Sun Air’s investments to fund other ventures that reduce harm to the environment. Carbon credits allow companies to compensate for their greenhouse gas emissions.

The aviation firm’s Van Nuys hangars are designed to be environmentally friendly and include a solar rooftop system.



SUN AIR JETS

HEADQUARTERS: Camarillo
CEO: Brian Council
BUSINESS: Aircraft charter and management services.
LOCATIONS: 2
EMPLOYEES: 145
NOTABLE: Has hangars at Van Nuys Airport that were built to be environmentally friendly.