

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
CONTRACT CHANGES FOR A SAFER FUTURE OF THE
AERIAL FIREFIGHTING PROGRAM**

10/31/02

Q1: What changes are you making regarding the contracted heavy airtanker fleet?

A1: The agencies are not making any permanent changes to the contracted heavy airtanker fleet to date. They are, however, deferring issuing the required contract notice for the C130 and PB4Y airtankers for 2003 because there is no preliminary or final report from NTSB on the cause of the accidents. The agencies are still gathering information to determine the safest and most effective course of action regarding these two aircraft.

Q2: Why are you making this decision now instead of waiting for the NTSB report?

A2: The contracting requirements are another reason the agencies are making the decision now. Airtanker contracts run on a three-year cycle; one-year renewable contracts determined under the "best value" process. 2003 is year two of this cycle. The Forest Service contracting unit, which is responsible for most of the contracting duties for the agencies' heavy airtankers, must issue "letters of intent" to each current contactor 60 days prior to the beginning of the contract cycle. The letters must be sent by October 31, 2002 to meet this deadline. The letters of intent indicate whether or not the federal agencies will exercise the option to renew the next year's contract.

Current vendors have begun upgrades, modifications, and repairs anticipating the decision by the federal firefighting agencies to renew current contracts. This time of year is usually the period allotted for "heavy maintenance" of fleet aircraft. By deciding on deferring the renewal of the C130As and PB4Ys, the operators can redirect their resources to those aircraft that they know will be activated on the national contract.

Q3: Will you change anything with the remaining heavy airtanker fleet?

A3: In August 2002, a letter from the interagency aviation leadership required a 15% reduction in load weight. The reduction in load will continue for 2003 operations with the tankers loaded by weight instead of volume as measured by micro-motion machines that are present or will be installed into the existing tanker bases. Retardant weighs an average of about 9.5 pounds per gallon, depending on the type.

Q4: What's the accident rate for the SEATs and the helitankers?

A4: There has been one Forest Service SEAT accident and one Type I Helicopter accident since 1990 with none resulting in fatalities. The BLM, which has used SEATs more in the past than the other agencies, has recorded three accidents since 1995 with no fatalities. Although helitanker use was not as prevalent in the early part of the decade, there have been no government-contracted helitanker accidents since 1990.

Q5: Is there any precedent for discontinuing use of airtankers?

A5: Yes. In the 1950's, military B-25 aircraft were used for retardant drops. After two fatal accidents in 1960, and further testing in 1961, the Forest Service determined the aircraft demonstrated severe nose-up rotation and a wing structure incapable of withstanding the g-force stress involved in dropping the load.

Also, the firefighting agencies discontinued contracting the C-119s in September of 1987 after fatal accidents in 1981 and 1987.

In every previous accident involving structural failure, a subsequent structural failure occurred in the same model of aircraft despite repairs or changes made to the satisfaction of the FAA before a return to service.

Q6: What companies will be affected by the delay?

A6: On the 2002 contract, the companies that supplied the C130As and the PB4Ys are Hawkins and Power Aviation, and TBM also supplied C130As. Both companies have other heavy airtankers that will have be included in the contract renewal.