

SAFETY ALERT

Boise, ID 02-18-2003

AVIATION RESOURCES SHORTFALL: Following the disastrous airtanker accidents that occurred during the 2002 season, a Blue Ribbon Panel was convened to assess the health and safety of the Federal wildland fire aviation programs. The Departments of Interior and Agriculture are taking the initiative to mitigate the sources of high risks in aircraft and operations. However, these measures will have some short-term effects on aircraft availability and place new limitations on certain operations that are worthy of notice. Thus the subject of this alert is to make you aware of the potential impacts on ground firefighting efforts.

AIRTANKERS: 11 large airtankers have been permanently grounded and will not be replaced during the 2003 season. The remaining 33 tankers are undergoing extensive inspection and repair to prevent the structural problems that have occurred in the aging fleet. There is not as yet a good indication when the fleet will be returned to service in its entirety. The expectation is that tankers will be late in returning to service as they complete the process one at a time. This means firefighters may have difficulty acquiring retardant support until well into the summer season.

LEADPLANES: Approximately half of the Federal leadplane fleet may be affected by a decision to retire USFS Barons due to aging airframes and lifetime limits. Replacement aircraft are being sought and once again are expected to be somewhat later in arriving than the normal start-up period. Early season tactical air coordination may therefore by necessity be provided through other resources such as ASM and ATGS platforms.

EMPHASIS ON INITIAL ATTACK: Within the Federal Agencies, in order to make the most of limited resources, emphasis is being placed on initial attack in order to minimize acreage lost. Limited availability of leadplanes and airtankers dictates that they will be reserved for initial attack and likely will not be assigned to large fire scenarios. The National MAC Group will provide updates on the status and availability of limited aerial resources as the season progresses.

RECOMMEND: FMO's, Incident Commanders and Ops Section Chiefs should advise firefighters that aerial delivery of retardant may not be as available to them as in the past and to adjust ground tactics accordingly. Operational risk management procedures should take into account added safety measures to account for the possibility of reduced aerial support.