

NIFC News

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U.S.D.A. FOREST SERVICE AND DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR AGENCIES CANCEL LARGE AIRTANKER CONTRACT

BOISE, IDAHO, MAY 10, 2004 – The U.S.D.A. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior announced today that they are terminating the contract for 33 large airtankers due to concerns over the airworthiness of the aircraft and public safety. The large fixed-wing airtankers were used in wildland firefighting primarily for initial attack and structure protection support.

The decision comes in response to findings and recommendations contained in the April 23, 2004 National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) report on three previous airtanker accidents. One critical NTSB finding states “it was apparent that no effective mechanism currently exists to ensure the continuing airworthiness of these firefighting aircraft.” The NTSB report also concluded that the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior were responsible for ensuring the safety of firefighting aircraft. Private companies operate the 33 airtankers under a contract with the federal agencies during the fire season.

Since most of the large airtankers were designed and used for military operations before their acquisition by contract companies, the NTSB report also indicated that a complete history of maintenance and inspection records are not available for many of them. This lack of documentation makes it impossible to guarantee airworthiness, according to the NTSB. The average age of the large airtankers is 48 years with some more than 60 years old.

“Safety is a core value of the firefighting community and it is non-negotiable,” said Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth. “To continue to use these contract large airtankers when no mechanism exists to guarantee their airworthiness presents an unacceptable level of risk to the aviators, the firefighters on the ground and the communities we serve.”

“We take the findings and recommendations made by NTSB very seriously.” said Director Clarke, “Chief Bosworth and I are committed to working with other federal agencies, our state partners, Congress, industry, and the public to understand and adjust to this change while continuing to provide safe and effective fire management and suppression.”

The large airtankers are one of many tools that firefighters use, but wildland fires are managed and suppressed on the ground, not from the air. During any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed on initial attack without the benefit of air support.

The agencies developed a strategy for the 2004 firefighting season to supplement aerial resources with other available aircraft such as large helicopters and helitankers, single engine airtankers (SEATS), and military C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS). A strategy for long-term aviation asset management and acquisitions of newer aircraft based on available funding will be developed by the leadership of the Forest Service and the DOI agencies.

“Clearly the days of operating older aircraft of unknown airworthiness for firefighting operations are over,” said Chief Bosworth. “We are grateful to the pilots, crews, and operators of these aircraft, who have dedicated themselves to firefighting efforts over the decades. We have the greatest fire management and suppression program in the world, and we will continue to protect lives, property and our nation’s natural resources.”

For further information, visit the website at www.nifc.gov/ or contact Rose Davis, Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Public Affairs at (208) 387-5437.

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