



## **Communication Plan Termination of Large Airtanker Contract**

### **Issue:**

The U.S.D.A. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are terminating the national 2004 airtanker contract. No large contract fixed-wing airtankers will be used in fire suppression for 2004.

### **Background:**

In 2002, two large airtankers, a C-130A and PB4Y2, crashed, killing five contract aviators. The National Transportation Safety Board investigated the accidents, and also included an analysis of a 1994 airtanker crash of a C-130A.

On April 23, 2004, the NTSB released their reports and sent their findings and recommendations in a letter to the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior. Included in the findings were:

- For many of the aircraft used in firefighting operations, very little, if any, ongoing technical and engineering support is available. Therefore, it is apparent that no effective mechanism currently exists to ensure continuing airworthiness of these firefighting aircraft (pg 7).
- The Forest Service and the DOI, as operators of these flights, are primarily responsible for ensuring the safety of these operations. Although they attempt to compel safe operations through the use of contract requirements, the Board's investigation revealed that their oversight and infrastructure simply are not adequate to assure safe operations (pg 8).

The NTSB recommended:

- The Forest Service and DOI should each develop maintenance and inspection programs for contract aircraft that are used in firefighting operations (pg 8).
- The Forest Service and DOI should hire personnel with aviation engineering and maintenance expertise to conduct appropriate oversight to ensure these maintenance requirements are met (pg 9).

The NTSB findings and recommendations closely mirror those of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Aerial Firefighting chartered by the Chief of the Forest Service and the Director of the BLM in 2002 after the two fatal airtanker accidents. The Blue Ribbon Panel examined the agencies' aviation programs and concluded that operating the airtanker program with older, large airtankers was not sustainable. The current airtankers are 48 to 60 years old.

The Forest Service and DOI do not currently have personnel or funding to meet the NTSB recommendations. Therefore, since the airworthiness of the large airtanker fleet cannot be determined, the agencies, with concurrence by the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, are terminating the contract for large airtankers. The agencies will not operate large airtankers for the 2004 fire season.

### **Goals:**

- To clearly explain the position of the agencies regarding the decision to terminate the airtanker contract to internal and external audiences.
- To communicate confidence in the agencies' ability to continue effective wildland fire management and suppression without large airtankers.

### **Objectives:**

- Use available and creative channels to disseminate information.
- To receive positive feedback that the decision is understood, and the short-term operations strategy is effective.
- To gain support for replacing the current fixed wing fleet with more modern aircraft.

### **Audiences:**

- Internal
  - Forest Service and DOI line officers, State Foresters, U.S. Fire Administration
  - Regional Public Affairs/Communications/Legislative Affairs staffs
  - Agencies' Contracting officers
  - Forest Service and DOI agencies fire management leadership, regional fire directors and field firefighting personnel
  - National and Regional IMTs
  - Forest Service and DOI aviation personnel including airtanker base managers, pilots, helicopter managers, dispatchers
  - All agency employees
- External
  - Airtanker contractors, Aerial Firefighting Industry Association
  - Fire retardant contractors
  - Appropriate legislative contacts
  - NTSB, FAA, Blue Ribbon Panel
  - Members of the California Blue Ribbon Commission on the Fires of 2003
  - CIIFC
  - Military
  - Tribal
  - Media – general, aviation-specific, and firefighting specific media

**External Briefings:**

<b>Name</b>	<b>To Brief</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>How</b>
Governors – WGA	Kevin Rierdan	5/10/04	Phone/Q&As, news release
Individual Governors	REGIONAL FORESTERS	5/10/04	
Air Tanker Contractors, AFIA	Tony Kern/Rick Willis	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone call
NTSB and FAA Blue Ribbon Panel and Sandia Labs	Tony Kern	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone call – reference website
Retardant Contractors	Tori Majors	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone call
Tribal contacts - Jim Erickson, NWCG rep Intertribal Timber Council	To be coordinated by FS and BLM LA		
Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centere (CIFFC) - Director	Alice Forbes	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone/email reference website
Military	Alice Forbes	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone

**All congressional contacts coordinated through Interior and Forest Service  
LA staffs.**

**Internal Briefings:**

<b>Name</b>	<b>To Brief</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>How</b>
RFs, Station Directors, Regional PA Directors,	FS Chief,	5/10/04 p.m.	Conference Call w/emailed materials
BLM State Directors, 8 NASF members	Larry Hamilton	5/10/04 p.m.	Confence call w/emailed materials
State Foresters	Through NASF – Don Artley, Jim Hubbard	5/10/04 p.m.	Email w/materials – reference website
Contracting Officers	Rick Willis, Alice Forbes	5/11/04 a.m.	Email
Regional (FS) and Fire Directors, RAOs, RASMs	Jerry Williams, Tom Harbour, Tony Kern	5/10/04 p.m.	Conference call with materials emailed
BLM State Fire Directors, Aviation Managers	Larry Hamilton, Dave Dash	5/10/4 p.m.	Conference call w/emailed materials
FMOs, Tanker Base Managers, Smokejumper Base Managers	From RFs and Fire Directors	5/11/04 a.m.	news release emailed, reference website
GACCs (to dispatch offices)	NMAC – NICC directors	5/11/04 a.m.	Conference call, reference website
All agency employees	Forest Supervisors, District Rangers, PAOs	5/11/04 a.m.	News release reference website, Letter from Chief, Director after three days
Current Fires and IMTs, all IMTs	NIFC PA staff	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone call – reference web - fax documents if necessary
U.S. Fire Administration Director and Dep. Dir	Mike Dougherty	5/11/04 a.m.	Phone call and email documents.

## **TACTICS:**

1. FS Regional Foresters, Public Affairs Directors, and LA will participate in a conference call with the Chief of the FS, Fire Director and AD for Aviation. BLM State Directors, Aviation Managers and their Public Affairs Staffs, along with 8 State representatives will participate in a conference call with the BLM Fire Director.
2. NIFC website will host:
  - a. News release
  - b. Q&As
  - c. Talking points
  - d. Blue Ribbon Panel support letter
  - e. Airworthiness fact sheet
  - f. Link to 2004 operations plan with addendum
3. News release will be sent out by the NIFC, with assistance by the FS press office. National media and aviation and firefighting specific media will be recipients. Regional Public affairs offices will be advised to prepare fact sheets on regional aviation programs. (Note sent from Rose to RO PA shops on 5/4/04)
4. Media calls will be directed to NIFC. NIFC will answer questions, coordinate interviews with federal and state Fire leadership, and provide contacts for other agencies and contractors. Policy questions and technical questions will be facilitated with appropriate fire leadership and subject matter experts.

## **Subject Matter Contacts:**

General information and media– Rose Davis USFS F&AM PAO - NIFC (208) 387-5437

- **Airworthiness, Operations:**  
Pat Norbury, USFS National Aviation Operations Officer, NIFC (208) 387- 5646
- **Aviation Safety:**  
Ron Hanks, USFS National Aviation Safety and Training Officer, NIFC, (208) 387-5607
- **BLM Perspective, Resource Allocation Coordination, National MAC:**  
Tom Boatner – BLM National Office of Fire & Aviation, Fire Operations(208) 387- 5060
- **State Forester perspective:**  
Don Artley – NASF rep to the National MAC (208) 867-0908 (cell)
- **Fire manager point of view (suggested):**  
Paul Broyles, National Park Service Operations and Safety, Type II IC, (208) 387-5226
- **Future of the airtanker program:**  
Tony Kern, USFS Fire & Aviation Mgmt, Assistant Dir. for Aviation, (202) 205-1505
- **Blue Ribbon Panel perspective:**  
Jim Hall, BRP Co-Chair. (202) 312-0600  
Bio located at [www.nifc.gov/blueribbon/panel.doc](http://www.nifc.gov/blueribbon/panel.doc)

**KEY MESSAGES:**

- The Forest Service, the DOI agencies and their state and local partners have the best firefighting programs in the world, and will continue to protect firefighters and the public, communities and the natural resources precious to us all.
- Airtankers are one of many tools used in fire suppression. Wildland fires are managed and suppressed on the ground, not from the air, so the agencies are confident that we can continue a safe and effective firefighting program.
- The Forest Service and DOI agencies do not have the personnel or funding to fully implement the recommendations for inspections and maintenance on large airtankers. Since the airworthiness of the aging airtanker fleet cannot be assured, the safest course of action is to discontinue the use of the older large airtanker fleet.

## TALKING POINTS:

- The Fire Management leaders of the agencies created a short-term strategy for 2004 that will incorporate increased pre-positioning of resources, additional helicopters and helitankers, additional Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs) and prioritization of resources to be protected.
- Large airtankers are primarily used for initial attack and structure protection support. While other aviation assets will be used to offset the lack of airtankers, ***homeowners and communities should take action today to reduce their fire danger by reducing fuels and using the FIREWISE concepts.***
- This decision may result in a reduced amount of retardant used in firefighting. During the past 3 years, airtankers delivered about 20% of all the suppressant (retardant, foam and water) used on fires. However, due to the condition of the fleet, we reduced the amount of retardant load by weight carried by these airtankers. For the past decade, the amount of retardant delivered by airtankers has been trending downwards, while helicopter suppressant delivery is increasing.
- In 2003, the agencies paid nearly 30 million dollars for airtankers during the fire season. With the termination of the contract, the cost of paying contract airtanker companies for preparing to fulfill the contract, including maintenance, inspections, training and overhead will be about 10 million dollars.
- Any unspent dollars associated with the termination of the contract will be used to offset the cost of additional firefighting resources to mitigate the reduction in airtankers. Additions to the aerial fleet could include added Single Engine Airtankers (SEATs), helitankers, and Type 1, 2, and 3, helicopters.
- Airtanker bases will continue to be an operating facility for Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs), helicopters, smokejumpers and aerial supervision operations.
- As needed, the agencies will use the eight National Guard and Air Force Reserve C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems (MAFFS) because they are documented airworthy by the military.
- Equipment and personnel will be prepositioned in areas of expected fire activity based on predictive services information. The National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) will control the assignments of all the additional aerial assets brought on contract to offset the reduction in aerial resources by the airtanker contract termination.
- Not every initial attack effort gets air support. Firefighters are trained to improvise and adapt to the conditions on the ground, and to the resources available to fight fire. The 10 Standard Fire Orders, guide firefighting efforts at all times and in all situations. By following these tenets, and by mitigating the 18 Watch Out Situations, firefighters are able to operate safely with or without air support.