

# NATIONAL INTERAGENCY FIRE CENTER

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: CANCELLATION OF LARGE AIRTANKER CONTRACT

### 1. What did the agencies decide about using the 33 fixed-wing large airtankers after the NTSB report?

The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI) agencies have chosen to terminate the contract for the 33 large airtankers because the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) indicated there is no method currently in place to adequately ensure the safety and airworthiness of the aircraft. Without a solid determination of airworthiness, these older aircraft pose an unacceptable risk to contract aviators, firefighters, and the public.

### 2. Who made this decision?

The U.S.D.A. Forest Service, and the DOI's Bureau of Land Management are the primary agencies that contract for large airtankers. Leadership from these agencies, as well as the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs made the decision after careful review of the NTSB findings and recommendations. The Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior support the decision, which was not easily made.

### 3. Why was the decision made?

On April 23, 2004, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released its reports, findings and recommendations regarding three airtanker accidents. The NTSB indicated that the probable cause for three airtanker accidents resulted from "fatigue fractures."

In a Safety Recommendation Letter to the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, the NTSB made several key statements including:

- It is apparent that no effective mechanism currently exists to ensure the continuing airworthiness of these older firefighting aircraft;
- The Forest Service and the DOI, as the operators of these flights, are primarily responsible for ensuring the safety of these operations;
- Although they (the FS and DOI) attempt to compel safe operations through the use of contract requirements, the Board's investigation found that their oversight and infrastructure are not adequate to ensure safe operations.





- Adequate data on the flight history of most of the aircraft is not available, and information on the stresses encountered by aircraft in the firefighting environment has not been adequately documented.

The Forest Service and DOI previously relied on the FAA to determine the airworthiness of aircraft. The agencies do not have the in-house expertise or funding to take over these inspection and maintenance responsibilities. Since the NTSB holds that the agencies are responsible, and safety and airworthiness cannot be assured, these large airtankers will no longer be used.

#### 4. Did the NTSB recommend discontinuing the use of large airtankers?

No, but since fire season is upon us, there is little decision space in responding to their safety recommendations. Neither the Forest Service nor the DOI has the inspection and maintenance capabilities outlined by NTSB, so they decided to terminate the contract and avoid using aircraft that cannot be documented as airworthy. All federal firefighting agencies have a deep commitment to the safety of aviators, firefighters on the ground and the communities we serve.

#### 5. Haven't the agencies taken safety actions in the past?

Yes. After the tragic 2002 fire season when five aviators were killed in two separate airtanker crashes, the Forest Service and the BLM chartered a Blue Ribbon Panel on Aerial Firefighting (BRP) to examine the agencies' programs and present their findings publicly. The report was released in December 2002, and echoes many of the statements made in the NTSB report. As a result of the BRP's findings, the agencies:

- Contracted with Sandia Technologies aging aircraft program to develop in-depth maintenance and inspection protocols for each large airtanker model. Those protocols were used to inspect all the aircraft beginning in 2003.
- Installed Traffic Collision Avoidance System (TCAS) in the airtankers.
- Reduced the retardant load weight of all large airtankers by 15%. Retardant weighs about nine pounds per gallon.
- Reduced flight time of the airtankers by dispatching them for only initial attack, and missions where life and property were at risk.

In addition, the Forest Service:

- Discontinued use of 11 Beechcraft Baron aircraft owned by the Forest Service and used for lead plane missions. These aircraft have reached 6,000 hours, which engineering studies show is their safety limit given the stress of flying in the firefighting environment.
- Established a Quality Assurance Branch in the aviation program to focus on review of contractor's maintenance and inspection records, and add standardization criteria to flight operations and pilot training.



## 6. What effect will this decision have on firefighting efforts?

Large airtankers were primarily used for initial attack and structure protection support, but wildland firefighting success is still based on safe, on-the-ground tactics. Without the large airtankers, likely strategies include greater prioritization for protection of high-value resources and use of additional helicopters and Single Engine Air Tankers. Prepositioning of helicopters and SEATS based on predictive information will be critical.

*It is important that homeowners and communities take an active role in protecting their property through fuels reduction projects and FIREWISE concepts.*

While the firefighting agencies have a successful initial attack rate of about 98%, the lack of airtankers could mean that additional fires escape initial attack. But on the many thousands of initial attack fires, airtankers are not generally used due to distance of flight or availability of the aircraft.

**The state and federal agencies' firefighters are the best in the world and will continue to effectively protect life, property and our natural resources.**

## 7. Aren't you transferring risk from aviators to ground firefighters?

There has always been a finite number of airtankers. They have never been available all the time, for every fire... even those fires that have threatened communities. Firefighters are trained to improvise and adapt to the conditions on the ground, and to the resources available to fight the fire. The same basic tenets, 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.

## 8. How will this affect the contractors?

The contract companies, located in Wyoming, Nevada, Montana, Arizona and California, will be paid for any availability and flight hours before the notice of contract termination. After the notice, the companies will submit a settlement proposal asking the government for costs associated with preparing to fulfill the 2004 contract such as inspections, training, maintenance and overhead. Federal acquisition regulations govern the negotiation process on payments from there.

## 9. What other aviation assets are there for firefighting?

The firefighting agencies are still using the single engine airtankers (SEATS) with 80 of these aircraft currently on exclusive use and call-when-needed contracts, and can activate eight military C-130 E and H model aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFs) as needed. There are also Canadair CL 215,



215T, and 415 water scooping airtankers that are documented airworthy and supported by Canadair.

Federally contracted helicopters:

Large (700 to 2000 gallon) helicopters – 4 exclusive use and 97 call-when-needed

Medium (300 to 700 gallon) helicopters – 26 exclusive use and 141 call-when-needed

Light (less than 300 gallon) helicopters – 97 exclusive use and 280 call-when-needed

The agencies' fire leadership is also assessing if and where to add additional helicopters if they are available.

In keeping with the need to ensure airworthiness of aircraft, the federal agencies **will not** be considering aircraft such as the BE200, the IL-76 or the A-10 since they do not hold current U.S. airworthiness certificates. The agencies are currently working through the list of state owned and contracted aircraft to determine if their airworthiness standards meet the NTSB guidance.

**10. Why is it acceptable to use SEATS and military aircraft when they are not designed for the specific retardant dropping mission?**

The single engine airtankers, or SEATS, are commonly used in crop dusting. While there may be more strain on them during firefighting operations, we believe them to be within acceptable performance limits.

The military C-130 E and H models that can be equipped with the MAFFS units are the responsibility of the military for airworthiness inspections and maintenance.

**11. What about smokejumper aircraft and leadplanes?**

All the federal smokejumper aircraft are operating within the original design intent. The Forest Service Sherpa aircraft are maintained under a military continuing airworthiness program.

As part of the response to Blue Ribbon Panel on Aerial Firefighting report issued in December 2002, the Forest Service has discontinued use of 11 Beechcraft Baron twin-engine airplanes used as lead planes. The 11 aircraft all have about 6,000 hours, and although their life is projected to be 10,000 hours, the turbulent flying conditions and harsh environment means they age more quickly. The Forest Service is in the process of acquiring new leadplanes, and all the other platforms currently being used by the agencies are operating within their original design intent and supported by the specified type manufacturer.

**12. Is this the end of the fixed-wing large airtanker program?**





For the immediate future, yes. One of the findings of the Blue Ribbon Panel report indicated that the large airtanker program, using the current older fleet of aircraft, was not sustainable. This seems to be confirmed by the findings in the recent NTSB report outlining their concerns with the airworthiness of these planes. The agencies are on a three-year budget cycle, so they'll be working to see what changes can be made to revive the airtanker program in some form in the future.

This is a difficult decision, given the impact to contractors and the visibility of the large airtankers as a tradition in firefighting, but it remains a sound decision to eliminate the risk of fatal accidents. We have been partners with the industry and pilots for decades, and many will miss the sound of the low, slow airtankers flying overhead. We believe that safety is one of our core values, and cannot continue to place pilots, firefighters and communities at risk from aircraft averaging fifty years old that cannot be determined airworthy.

The agencies are looking to private industry, educational institutions and other organizations for technologies to create a large fixed-wing airtanker fleet with aircraft specifically designed for this mission and capable of meeting airworthiness requirements from the FAA. The future development of a safe large airtanker program will be realized with these partners and Congress.