



Tanker turmoil

Most of fleet grounded as season nears; replacement plan founders

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By RICHARD BROOKS / The Press-Enterprise

With most of the nation's big air tankers grounded by safety concerns for the second straight year, firefighting officials now have more bad news: They won't meet their previous goal of modernizing the aging fleet by 2008.

The U.S. Forest Service is concentrating on how to safely return to duty as many planes as possible, and little progress has been made on a long-range plan, issued in 2003, that called for a fleet of 30 to 35 jet-powered air tankers and 15 to 20 large helicopters by 2008 to fight fires nationwide.

"I can't put a time on it," said Larry Brosnan, the Forest Service's top-ranking aviation official.

"Our focus ... is on the upcoming season," Brosnan said. "We take this one season at a time."

This season, only 10 air tankers are considered safe enough to fly, down from 33 that were grounded at the beginning of 2004. The remaining 23 planes are parked indefinitely.

Brosnan disagrees with tanker pilots who argue that grounding so many planes is putting lives and property at risk if there is a repeat of the devastating wildfires of 2003 that claimed seven lives and destroyed about 1,400 homes in San Bernardino County.

"We feel like we have adequate resources," Brosnan said by phone from Washington, D.C.

This year the service is relying on the 10 tankers that have met new safety requirements, six heli-tankers, 24 medium helicopters and eight military C-130 fire bombers.



Pilots Are Skeptical

But that won't be enough if the reduced fleet is faced with a severe fire season, tanker pilots contend.

"If we get (a) season like we had in Southern California at the end of 2003 ... we're going to lose property that we would have been able to save with the aircraft we had a few years ago," said pilot Walt Darran of the Associated Airtanker Pilots' safety committee.

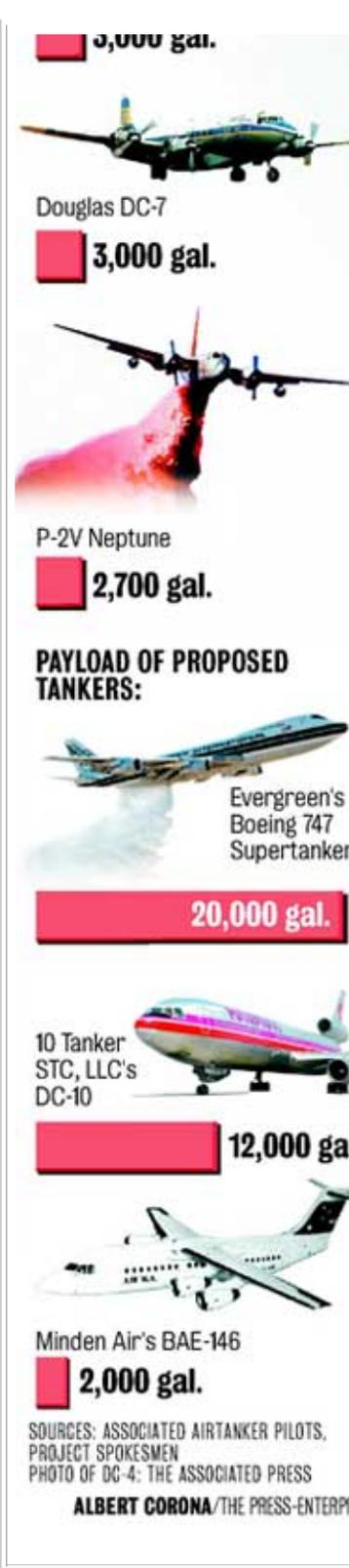
Report Was Critical



The Forest Service's large air tanker program became dysfunctional after the National Transportation Safety Board released a stunning report in April 2004 on three tanker crashes.

Among the findings: Metal fatigue caused the wings to snap off three aging tankers in 1994 and 2002, killing eight crew members, and the Forest Service had no method of ensuring the airworthiness of the rest of the fleet, the report said.

Tanker pilots say it wasn't necessary to cancel the contracts for any of the 33 tankers scheduled to fly during 2004.



The types of planes that fell apart -- C-130A Hercules and PB4Y Privateers -- already had been permanently grounded, Darran said, and the remaining types of planes have never suffered a structural failure.

Darran said he would prefer to have all of the idled planes returned to service, but equipped with sensors that can monitor the aerodynamic stresses and whether any cracks are developing.

For a long-term fix that would meet modernization goals, the Forest Service is counting on the tanker industry to offer solutions and to design and develop a new generation of tankers. The service does not own any tankers, nor does it fund upgrades. It relies on contractors to supply, maintain and fly the planes during fire season, and propose improvements.

The possibilities include: new planes designed specifically for firefighting, existing passenger planes or cargo haulers that can be converted to drop fire retardant, or acquiring additional Lockheed P-3 Orions, which have passed all the safety tests and comprise seven of the 10 tankers of the current fleet.

Only three types of large planes have begun formal testing to become the next generation of tankers. Among them: a wide-body DC-10 that's being converted in Victorville.

Industry in Turmoil

The air-tanker industry has been in turmoil since the Forest Service grounded the 33 large air tankers while airworthiness requirements were revamped. Two firms that own and operate tankers under contract to the Forest Service have gone out of business.

Industry spokesman Bill Broadwell says most of the six remaining large air-tanker companies are hanging on by a thread as they face the possibility of a second season without any income from the Forest Service, the sole customer for most.

At age 65, tanker owner Gary Garrett is throwing in the towel.

"This has put me out of business," the Tucson-based pilot said of his inability to secure a federal contract for his three Douglas DC-4s. "We haven't had a paycheck in a year."

The big winner this year is Aero Union, a Montana-based firm whose seven Lockheed P-3 Orions are the newest and -- with a 3,000-gallon capacity -- among the largest retardant-haulers in the fleet.

Powered by four jet turbo-prop engines, the converted submarine hunters were originally delivered to the Navy during the 1960s.

This season, the P-3s are being augmented by two older Lockheed P-2V Neptunes and a Douglas DC-7 that have been specially instrumented to collect research data.

The Next Generation

In recent years, everything from blimps to converted Russian Il-76 jet transports have been suggested as possible air tankers. The Russian jet has been touted by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Huntington Beach.

Among the most novel ideas to be rejected: Dropping fire retardant from a tank tethered among four helicopters that would maneuver a bit like tug boats guiding an ocean liner.

"We don't want to discourage (novel concepts). But we look at it from a safety standpoint and an effectiveness standpoint," said Scott Fisher, chairman of the National Interagency Airtanker Board.

Three tanker proposals are undergoing board scrutiny, Fisher said. They are Evergreen International Airlines' Boeing 747 Supertanker, Nevada-base Minden Air's converted BAE-146 commuter jet, and the Victorville-based DC-10.

"We're well along in development," spokesman Rick Hatton said of the little-publicized DC-10 project by 10 Tanker STC, LLC. "We're about to push her out of the (hangar) and take it to the Paris Air Show in June."

Capable of dropping 12,000 gallons of fire retardant -- a load equal to that of four existing tankers -- the DC-10 could be operational this fire season.

'We'll Be Ready to Go'

"We'll be ready to go this July," said Hatton, a partner in the project. "But no one has hired us yet."

Evergreen's 747 also could begin work this year or next.

"We hope to be flying experimentally (on fires) this season ... and flying full-time next season," said Jordan Hanson, spokeswoman for Evergreen.

With a capacity of roughly 20,000 gallons, the 747 does the work of seven conventional tankers, she said.

Though the idea remains to be tested, Hanson said the jumbo tanker is supposed to be capable of dropping retardant in mountainous terrain and near homes -- including those in Southern California.

Flying at 160 mph between 400 and 800 feet above the ground, the big jet would attack fire in valleys and atop canyons.

"It can work right at the ridges of those canyons to keep fire from leaving those areas," the spokeswoman predicted.

Reach Richard Brooks at (909) 806-3057 or rbrooks@pe.com

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