

From Russia, with water: Firm seeks to import fire-fighting tanker plane

By [Stephen Nellis](#) on January 18, 2013.



From left, David Baskett and Adrian Butash of Santa Maria-based International Emergency Services are working to bring a fleet of Russian water bombers to the U.S. to Santa Maria to fight fires at home and abroad. (Stephen Nellis photo)

A Santa Maria aviation entrepreneur has launched a new firm with a plan to bring a fleet of Russian-built water bombers to the Central Coast for fighting wildfires.

David Baskett formed International Emergency Services to import a fleet of up to 10 Beriev BE-200 water bombers. The planes would have a U.S. base of maintenance, repair and operations at the Santa Maria airport.

The planes are pricey — about \$44 million each — and would be funded through half debt and half equity. Baskett told the Business Times that he has investors and institutional financiers lined up for the first two or three planes. The entire plan, however, hinges on securing a firefighting contract with the U.S. Forest Service, which is looking to replace its aging tanker fleet after crashes and maintenance problems grounded all but a handful of planes.

“No contract, the aircraft doesn’t come and everybody goes home,” Baskett told the Business Times.

The BE-200 did visit Santa Maria in 2010. Baskett, a combat veteran who has helped the Department of Defense acquire foreign aircraft and personally

owns a vintage Russian MiG fighter jet, persuaded the Federal Aviation Administration to allow a test demonstration of the plane.

International Emergency Services, which goes by IES for short, recently went to Washington to try to persuade lawmakers to hold a “flyoff” that would pit the BE-200 against competitors such as the Lockheed C-130 and the British Aerospace 146. The C-130, a turbo-prop craft, entered service in 1956. The BAE-146 came out in 1986 and features jet engines. They both must be filled up with hoses in order to pickup water. The Russian plane, by contrast, saw its first flight in 1998 and features top-mounted jet engines so that it can scoop water up from lakes or rivers and make more passes in a shorter time span.

IES is confident it would beat the Western competition. “It’s like Clint Eastwood showing up in town and saying, ‘Where are you guys?’ ” said Adrian Butash, the firm’s marketing director.

There is a slight problem: The BE-200 is not approved for U.S. use by the F.A.A. Baskett said the plane is in the early stages of seeking U.S. approval but that there’s a possibility that aviation regulators could give the plane a provisional exception if the Forest Service chose to tap it for the 2013 fire season.

“The fact that this is certified in Europe is mostly nice, but the F.A.A. doesn’t recognize the certification in Europe,” Baskett said. “Russia being Russia, it’s a little different. The Russian government is working on a budget line for this airplane’s certification.”

The Forest Service, which oversees the Los Padres National Forest that stretches through entire Tri-County region, has recognized the deep need for new planes. After two firefighting tankers crashed within a month of each other in 2002, a blue-ribbon panel grounded most of the fleet. In 2012 there were two more crashes

“Over the course of five years, those numbers have dwindled down to 11, which is what we operated last year” before the crashes, said Matt Olson, the contracting officer for the tankers.

“Part of the issue with the air tankers is that the aircraft were getting older. We were looking to have a more viable option in the future,” he said.

The Forest Service now has two contracts out, one “legacy” contract that covers current technology and another “next generation” contract for newer craft.

“We changed the requirements to try to modernize the fleet and bring in new vendors,” Olson said. “It’s kind of an expensive process to get into this field, and we wanted to see what the best way is for people to bring in new aircraft.”

Indeed it will be multiples more expensive. That’s in part because the planes are new and pricey, but also in part because the older fleet has roots in a scandal during the late 1980s and early 1990s in which surplus aircraft were basically given away for free to contractors.

“The days of the \$5,000 a day airplane are over,” Baskett said. “They had a lower cap-ex component compared to this.” He estimates costs for the BE-200 will be in the \$25,00 to \$30,000 range.

Part of Baskett’s business plan is to use the BE-200s in other parts of the world as well as in the U.S. When the fire danger is low in the U.S. in the winter, it’s high in places like South America and Australia, whose seasons are reversed in the Southern hemisphere.

“We don’t want to let it rust,” Baskett said. “We want to make money off it.”

Because the Forest Service contract would cover many fixed costs and unlock financing for the planes, Baskett said his company would use part of that international revenue to provide the Forest Service a discount.

How much the discount would add up to is an open question, but the potential is there. “That’s a \$7-million-a-year question,” Baskett said. “If we earn a dollar fighting fires somewhere else, we’ll give you a part of that dollar.”

As the Forest Service nears its decisions, Baskett is continuing to line up equity investors and debt financiers. “To pay for a \$44 million airplane, you’re going to need to raise a lot of money,” he said.