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Contact: Jennifer Jones
(208) 387-5437 – office
(208) 631-0406 - mobile

U.S. Forest Service Shores Up Airtanker Fleet, With Help From States of Alaska and California, To Maintain Readiness For Wildfire Suppression

The U.S. Forest Service is taking actions to maintain its aerial firefighting capability after a series of events that have significantly reduced the number of airtankers available for wildfire suppression over the last year, including an accident last Sunday that tragically resulted in the deaths of two Neptune Aviation Services, Inc. pilots.

“The pilots of Tanker 11 lost their lives protecting public safety and natural resources,” said Tom Harbour, Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service. “As the entire fire and aviation community grieves their loss, we must ensure that we maintain our capability to fulfill our responsibilities to be prepared to respond vigorously to wildfires threatening people, communities, infrastructure, and natural and cultural resources.”

The U.S. Forest Service currently has nine operational large airtankers on exclusive use contracts. The U.S. Forest Service has arranged for a total of four additional airtankers to become available immediately for wildfire suppression. Two are CV-580s, one of which is available through an agreement with the state of Alaska and one of which is available through an agreement with the Canadian Interagency Fire Centre. These airtankers will be available for wildfire suppression nationwide. The other two airtankers are CAL FIRE S-2Ts, which will be staffed and available in California through an agreement offered by the state and funded by the U.S. Forest Service.

“The loss of the two aerial firefighters has reverberated through the fire service community and our thoughts are certainly with their families and coworkers as they grieve,” said Chief Ken Pimlott, Director of CAL FIRE. “In the wake of this tragedy, we reached out to our federal partners to offer this agreement which staffs two CAL FIRE airtankers in California a month earlier than we would normally staff them based on the current wildfire threat.”

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The U.S. Forest Service is also arranging for five heavy (Type 1) helicopters to become available for wildfire suppression nationwide earlier than scheduled. The U.S. Forest Service believes that the additions of the airtankers and heavy helicopters will enable the agency to respond effectively to current and predicted fire activity. If needed, the U.S. Forest Service can also mobilize eight military C-130s equipped with Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems (MAFFS) to serve as large airtankers as well as a DC-10 very large airtanker.

Airtankers play an important role in wildfire suppression, particularly during the early stages known as “initial attack,” by dropping retardant that reduces the intensity and rate of spread of wildfires, enabling firefighters on the ground to safely construct fireline.

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