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Strong Need for a Single National Aerial Firefighting Agency

By Mike Padilla

The devastating fires that raged throughout the United States and particularly in Texas in 2011 have shown that U.S. aerial firefighting fleet is less than adequate to cope with the ever-increasing demands of protecting life and property

The demise of air resources can be attributed directly to the inability of the federal agencies that manage the fleet. They are unable to meet their responsibility of providing adequate numbers of aircraft and crews.



Canada's Conair fighting Colorado fires in June 2012 – Photo by Steve Nelson

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The major underlying reason for this degradation in service is the fragmented approach that the federal wildland firefighting community has had in fielding firefighting aircraft. Numerous and often duplicative federal, state and local agencies are responsible for these aircraft. All have differing and sometimes conflicting rules, regulations and standards for the acquisition, contracting, crew qualifications, maintenance and operation of these aircraft. The resulting confusion of this costly bureaucratic morass is seen not only in

skyrocketing budget breaking programs but delays and inadequate responses that cause unnecessary property loss and death. This was typified in the Los Angeles County Station Fire of 2010 and the Bastrop fire in Texas this last year.

The unnecessary grounding by the Forest Service of the Aero Union P-3s half way through the fire season and the delay of the DC-10 on the Bastrop for supposed “safety” concerns underscores the lack of competency on the part of federal agencies in meeting their responsibly as a supplier of adequate aerial firefighting resources.

The time to centralize and coordinate the nation’s aerial firefighting aircraft has come. We can no longer tolerate a costly, fragmented, disjointed and unprofessional approach to what is a very complex and highly technical field. Unifying the national aerial firefighting effort under one agency will:

- Improve and centralize national coordination of resources between local, state and federal agencies.
- Reduce costs by reducing duplicity between agencies.
- Standardize aircrew requirements, training, and carding.
- Simplify and speedup aircraft contracting.
- Establish a more coordinated and realistic future aircraft design and delivery requirements.
- Establish a single national aircraft maintenance and inspection program.
- Establish a grants and contracting mechanism to standardize and utilize local and state aerial firefighting resources.

It is important that when centralizing the national aerial firefighting fleet that state and local agencies in fire prone areas be allowed to take a greater role in the decision making and particularly in the operations of the national aerial firefighting fleet. The Station and Bastrop fires are great examples where conflicting strategies and convoluted decision making lead to delays in the appropriate use of aerial assets. The centralization of the firefighting fleet should not mean a continuation of federal priorities as the driving motivation for the acquisition, management, deployment and operation of these national assets. State and local wildland firefighting agencies have different constituents who are demanding greater protection from their fire agencies. Their contract with the federal agencies to provide adequate aerial firefighting aircraft is not being met. “One size fits all” does not apply here. By making local and state agencies equal partners in the national decision making process they become shareholders in important and long term decisions.

It’s time to bring a focused approach to the national aerial firefighting program by creating a single agency out of a confusion of many. We can no longer afford to ignore our national obligation to protect lives and property with an archaic program that shift with the winds of Washington.

As we ground aircraft for supposed “safety” issues and delay responses, we have exceeded the capability of anyone to extinguish these fires except Mother Nature.

About the author:

Mike Padilla was the Chief of Aviation for Cal Fire from 2000 to 2009 and has fought wildland fires on the ground and in the air since 1964. He is a commercial helicopter and airplane pilot, and holds a helicopter instructors license. Mr. Padilla as a Cal Fire Air Operations officer and California National Guard pilot pioneered the Military Interagency Helicopter Aerial Firefighting Program and as Chief of Aviation was instrumental in fielding the DC-10 airtanker and modernizing Cal Fire's current fleet of over 50 helicopters and airplane firefighting fleet.

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