

Aerial fire retardant – good or bad?

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During Southern California's fire season, most people become accustomed to visions of helicopters dropping a spray of red elixir, fire retardant, onto blazing hillsides.

The red substance – a mixture of water, fertilizer, an anti-corrosion chemical (to sustain the tank that carries the retardant) and red dye – draws out the oxygen from a wildfire, preventing its spread. However, the retardant, when dropped in bodies of water can be harmful to endangered species and their habitat.

In July, a federal judge found fire retardant aerial drops to be illegal and gave the U.S. Forest Service until the end of next year to find an alternative to the environmentally corruptive practice.

While environmentalists say they are not against the practice of using fire retardant all together, they do want to minimize the harm aerial drops may have on endangered species and waterways.

Others have mentioned the danger posed to pilots who must navigate highly smoke-congested areas to deliver the retardant as a reason to stop the practice.

Supporters of the the aerial drop claim its use is justified because, ultimately, it can buy ground forces time to fight a wildfire head on. Basically, in conjunction with ground crews, fire retardant can be a valuable asset.

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