

USFS firefighting tanker fleet inadequate

By Michael R. Blood, AP

LOS ANGELES – With a vast swath of the West primed for wildfires, federal foresters are preparing for the worst with a budget that might run dry and a fleet of air tankers that in some cases aren't ready for takeoff.

A combination of extended drought, warming weather and an abundance of withered trees and grasses have created ideal conditions for fire – more than 22 million acres were blackened by wildfires from 2011-13, primarily across the West.

“It looks like it's going to be a serious enough season to where we run out of money again,” Tom Harbour, director of fire and aviation management for the U.S. Forest Service, warned in an interview with the Associated Press.

“I'm really concerned, there is no question,” Harbour said. “I think we are going to have a lot of fire.”

The agency is doing what it can to prepare for wildfire season by burning sections of forest in high-risk areas to remove dead or dry vegetation that could fuel a fire. In another step, crews will launch a major forest-thinning project on Lake Tahoe's North Shore.

In no place is the situation more worrisome than in California, where several years of stingy rainfall have turned forests and scrub into matchsticks and tens of thousands of homes are perched along fire-prone areas.

Firefighters battled a blaze in the mountains east of Los Angeles last week, where temperatures neared triple digits.

And states from New Mexico through southern Oregon have been left seere by a lack of rain and snow.

But even as fire risk has increased in recent years, the number of large air tankers dropped.

About a decade ago the Forest Service had more than 40 of the big tankers at its disposal – the draft horses of firefighting aircraft that can dump thousands of gallons of flame-snuffing retardant in a single swoop, far more than a helicopter.

According to federal analysts, the fleet hit a low of eight aircraft at one point last year, depleted by age and concerns over the ability of the planes, in some cases flying since the dawn of the Cold War, to stay in the sky.

Deadly crashes – including when a 57-year-old tanker flew into the side of a Utah mountain in June 2012, killing the pilot and co-pilot – fanned doubts about safety. A federal investigation into the cause of that crash is incomplete.

The agency has been working for several years to modernize its creaky fleet of tankers, with checkered results.

The core of the fleet was expected to include 17 aircraft for 2014, but seven of those planes aren't ready to fly.

The fleet is anchored to eight aircraft with an average age of half a century. As part of a modernization blueprint, the Forest Service contracted last year for seven newer tankers that can fly twice as fast as the older planes and carry larger payloads, but only two are on the runway.

The others are eight months late on delivery. Among the issues: The tankers have yet to obtain Federal Aviation Administration certification, a requirement to fly.

The agency hopes to have all the tankers off the ground by summer, but Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., has called the delay unacceptable.

“These tankers promised to be a game-changer for Western communities grappling with the perennial threat of modern mega-fires,” Udall wrote to the Forest Service in April. “I am deeply concerned that delivery of the remaining five will be further delayed and unavailable for the 2014 wildfire season.”

Federal studies suggest the agency needs as many as 28 of the newer, faster tankers, but that target remains years away.

Meanwhile, plans for two other large tankers have been sidelined by a dispute over a contract that called for paying up to \$496 million over nine years to a Montana company for exclusive use of two aircraft. A decision has not been made whether to scrap the deal or try to fix it.

In another glitch, federal legislation gave the Forest Service the authority to obtain up to five extra air tankers, but didn't provide the funds to lease them.

The agency can also draw on eight military tankers, if needed. Eight others can be dispatched from Alaska and Canada, but those are not always available.

Federal foresters are moving earlier this year to get firefighters and equipment into threatened areas.

“We are going to be looking at the weather and conditions ... and move things as we need to, to try to head things off before they get ahead of us,” said agency spokesman Mike Ferris.

The Forest Service does not own the large tankers but strikes agreements with aviation companies that buy used aircraft, modify them for firefighting duty and then offer them for government lease. The agency also leases helicopters and smaller aircraft to douse fires.

The up-and-down pursuit of a faster, more reliable tanker fleet has played out against a backdrop of increasingly

destructive blazes.

From 2000 to 2008, at least 10 states had fires of record-breaking size. In 2011, a wildfire scorched 538,000 acres in Arizona and New Mexico, an area so large it would cover much of the state of Rhode Island.

Costs for daily air tanker availability doubled from \$15 million in 2007 to \$33 million in 2010. Meanwhile, the cost of fighting wildfires has soared, up from 13 percent of the agency's budget a decade ago to over 40 percent. That's forced the agency to strip funds from other programs to keep up, officials say.

A government report last week said federal agencies expect to spend \$1.8 billion fighting wildfires this year, but that's \$470 million more than what's available for the job.

When homes or lives are lost, the Forest Service often faces questions about a lack of tankers, or how it uses them.

Shortly before 19 members of a firefighting Hotshot crew were killed in Arizona last year, records showed officials summoned six air tankers, but none arrived because of the limited number of tankers in the fleet and dangerous weather conditions. Fire officials said even if the big planes were available, winds were so strong they couldn't have been used to save the firefighters. Among recommendations after the deaths, investigators said more instructions were needed for the "effective use" of the largest tankers.

As part of the commemoration of the deaths this year, Forest Service firefighters will hold discussions on risks and hazards "to avoid (a) similar outcome," Ferris said in an email.

Government studies generally agree tankers play an important role in suppressing wildfires, particularly in "initial attack" – the early stages when failure to knock down a blaze

quickly can lead to an inferno.

Harbour and other experts stress that the biggest job of extinguishing fires remains with ground crews, since embers and brush can continue to burn after a water or retardant hit. Instances of aircraft extinguishing fire are rare.

In another move by Congress, the Forest Service would receive seven, large HC-130 aircraft from the Coast Guard for firefighting. But it could be at least 2017 before they are all modified to carry retardant.

For now, the planes remain with the Coast Guard, even though the law aimed to have them transferred months ago.

“Is there part of me that hopes, starting July 4, it starts raining?” Harbour asked. “You bet.”