

High-end firefighting plane stationed in Tahoe



The Super Scooper firefighting aircraft, for now, is calling Lake Tahoe Airport home. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Firefighting capabilities in the Lake Tahoe region have increased to a level not seen before when there wasn't a fire already raging.

"This brings continuous water drops. That's what sets it apart," Kevin Merrill, national amphibious aircraft manager with the U.S. Forest Service, told *Lake Tahoe News* as he walked around the aircraft.

The Super Scooper firefighting aircraft – as it is known – arrived at Lake Tahoe Airport on Monday. The plane is considered a national resource so it could be pulled into service elsewhere at any even given moment. It is the only one in the country.

“It’s the perfect aircraft for this unit. It’s surrounded by the best water source,” Merrill said of Lake Tahoe.

What makes this Bombardier CL415 different than other firefighting aircraft is that it can operate more efficiently. It can scoop up 1,621 gallons of water in 20 seconds and then fly for three hours without refueling.

Other aircraft get water on land, which slows the process. Though those planes can hold up to 3,000 gallons. Helicopters are not as efficient as the Super Scooper either, according to Merrill.

“With severe drought conditions and lots of lightning fires so far, we anticipate this aircraft will greatly assist our ground-based firefighters this season,” Cheva Gabor with the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It’s a bulky looking plane, which goes beyond the two massive turbo prop engines. There are mooring cleats on the nose and it has an anchor.

Being able to fly super slow allows it to skim a water body’s surface. The length and depth of a lake are two of the basic factors in determining if it is suitable for the Super Scooper. Fallen Leaf Lake could be used if wind were not a factor.

The 3-year-old plane will not be in Tahoe forever. This is year two of a five-year test project. The Forest Service has a contract with Aeroflite out of Spokane.

Last year it flew about 300 hours and dumped 1.5 million gallons of water. The five-member crew (two pilots, two mechanics, one flight manager) flew in Florida, Oklahoma, Michigan, Washington, Oregon and Southern California in 2014. This year the plane has been in Tennessee, Florida, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Alaska and now Lake Tahoe.

At the end of the five-year contract the Forest Service will evaluate the feasibility of the Super Scooper being used more extensively.