

USFS expanding firefighting capabilities

The U.S. Forest Service has a new firefighting tool in its arsenal.

Tanker 118 on July 10 started flying wildfire suppression missions from Sacramento.

The Forest Service began using air tankers to drop fire retardant in the 1950s. For the past 35 years, the agency has used air tankers contracted from private industry. The 2014 National Defense Authorization Act authorized the transfer of seven HC-130H aircraft from the Coast Guard to the Forest Service for use in wildfire suppression.

The first HC-130H, known as Tanker 118, is currently located at Forest Service Air Station McClellan in Sacramento, which will be its base of operations for the next two years.

Tanker 118 has been located at the Coast Guard Air Station Sacramento since mid-June while maintenance, installation and testing of the Modular Airborne Firefighting System unit and contractor pilot and maintenance crew training have been taking place

Tanker 118 will only fly wildfire suppression missions within 500 nautical miles from its base so it can return there each night for maintenance by contract crews and support from Coast Guard crews.

The Forest Service, Coast Guard, and Air Force have been working together to complete the significant amount of work that is needed on all seven HC-130H aircraft before they can begin flying wildfire suppression missions. These modifications include demilitarization; performing wing and airframe modifications; designing, contracting for,

manufacturing and installing retardant tanks; and equipping them with radios, Aircraft Flight Following, and other equipment. The work is expected to be completed by 2019.

The Forest Service now has of 22 air tankers available full time for wildfire suppression this fire season. The agency also has the ability to activate up to eight military C-130s.