

Cost-benefit analysis of aerial firefighting

By Kelsey Ray, High Country News

When large wildfires blaze, the public counts on airplanes to put them out. Pilots fly air tankers over mountainous terrain and drop fire retardant – up to nearly 12,000 gallons per trip – onto the dense forests below.

The bursts of red slurry bring hope to those whose homes are imperiled. Politicians and the media thrill at the sight and clamor for more.

But is it safe? And is it effective enough to justify the high costs?

The U.S. Forest Service, which saw its large air tanker fleet shrink to just nine planes in 2012, has 20 air tankers on exclusive-use and call-when-needed contracts for the 2015 season, plus one under Forest Service operation. Spokeswoman Jennifer Jones said the agency is working to bring up to 28 air tankers into service.

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