

latimes.com/news/local/la-me-wildfires29-2008jul29,0,5666042.story

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## **Air tanker drops in wildfires are often just for show**

**The bulky aircraft are reassuring sights to those in harm's way, but their use can be a needless and expensive exercise to appease politicians. Fire officials call them 'CNN drops.'**

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Second of five parts

July 29, 2008

The deadly 2003 Cedar fire was raging through San Diego County. Rep. Duncan Hunter, whose home in Alpine would burn to the ground, couldn't understand why military aircraft hadn't been called in to fight the blaze. He decided to do something about it.

Hunter phoned Ray Quintanar, regional aviation chief for the U.S. Forest Service, and demanded that giant C-130 cargo planes be mobilized to attack the fire with retardant.

Quintanar explained that winds were too high and visibility too poor for aircraft to operate. Forest Service air tankers had already been grounded. But, as both men recall the episode, Hunter would not be dissuaded. He told Quintanar to call "Mr. Myers" and rattled off a Washington, D.C., phone number.

"Who's he?" Quintanar asked.

"He's the one with all the stars on his chest standing next to Don Rumsfeld," Hunter replied, describing Gen. Richard B. Myers, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

When Quintanar resisted, Hunter called Washington and pleaded his case directly with Myers. Over the next two days, six C-130 Hercules transports were dispatched to Southern California from bases in Wyoming, North Carolina and Colorado. The planes saw action once the weather improved, but in Quintanar's view they contributed little to controlling the fire.

Hunter says he has no regrets about his end run around the chain of command. "California was on fire, I got 'em the planes," he said in a recent interview. "That's my job."

To professional firefighters, though, it was a prime example of a "political air show," the high-profile use of expensive aircraft to appease elected officials.

Fire commanders say they are often pressured to order planes and helicopters into action on major fires even when the aircraft won't do any good. Such pressure has resulted in needless and costly air operations, experienced fire managers said in interviews.

The reason for the interference, they say, is that aerial drops of water and retardant make good television. They're a highly visible way for political leaders to show they're doing everything possible to quell a wildfire, even if it entails overriding the judgment of incident commanders on the ground.

Firefighters have developed their own vernacular for such spectacles. They call them "CNN drops."

"A lot of people do a lot of things for publicity and for politics that don't need to be done," said Jim Ziobro, fire aviation chief for the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Increased use of aircraft is helping to drive up the cost of fighting wildfires. The Forest Service spent \$296 million on aerial firefighting last year, compared with \$171 million in 2004. Aviation costs amount to about one-fifth of the agency's fire-suppression spending.

Nearly all of the nation's firefighting aircraft are owned and operated by private companies under contract with the government. The meter starts running when an incident commander calls aircraft to a fire. It continues whether a plane is in the air dropping retardant or sitting on a remote tarmac, waiting for visibility to improve.

It costs up to \$14,000 a day to keep an air tanker on call and as much as \$4,200 per hour to put it in the air. Heavy-duty helicopters, the workhorses of aerial firefighting, can cost \$32,000 a day on standby, plus \$6,300 per hour of flight time.

"When you deal with aviation on a wildland fire, you have a big bank in the sky that opens up and showers money," said Timothy Ingalsbee, a former Forest Service and National Park Service firefighter who has criticized federal firefighting and forest management practices.

### **Unrealistic expectations**

Pressure to use aircraft has grown as wildfires have become larger and more dangerous, and as more subdivisions have sprung up in fire-prone canyons and woodlands. When a column of smoke appears in the distance, frightened homeowners want dramatic action, and an air tanker pouring red retardant on a blazing ridgeline is undeniably dramatic.

As a result, Americans have become conditioned to think officials aren't taking a fire seriously until they unleash a ferocious aerial attack.

"If there's a fire and there's not an air tanker circling in California, people go, 'Oh my God, we're defenseless,' when in fact we're probably not," said Scott Vail, a retired Forest Service incident commander.

Aircraft have an important but limited role in firefighting. In the early stages of a fire, drops of water or retardant can hold the flames in check until ground crews arrive. Aircraft can also douse fires on ridges or in canyons that firefighters can't reach. An all-out aerial attack can save money if it brings a fire under control early.

"You can make or break a fire in one day with the right amount of aviation," said Dennis Hulbert, the Forest Service's aviation chief for California.

But it's a firefighting axiom that "aviation doesn't put out a fire." Only crews and engines on the ground can do that.

What's more, bulky tankers such as C-130s -- designed to carry troops, armored vehicles and other equipment -- are not well-suited to operate in California's steep canyons and mountains or at the low altitudes required for effective delivery of water and retardant.

The Forest Service and other federal agencies have about 450 firefighting planes and helicopters under contract. The planes are mainly older single- and multi-engine crop dusters and surplus military craft retrofitted for firefighting.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection has its own air force. The fleet includes two dozen tankers, 11 heavy-duty helicopters, 14 twin-engine command-and-control planes and a converted DC-10 jumbo jet on lease. Cal Fire spent more than \$34 million on aviation last year, including \$7 million for the exclusive use of the DC-10.

The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, is supposed to allocate aircraft based purely on professional judgment. The center, known as NIFC (pronounced *nif-see*), was created in 1965 to serve as the nation's operational nerve center for wildland firefighting. The idea was to insulate decision-making from political pressure.

In practice, though, politicians still manage to influence when and where planes are deployed.

### **A resort uses its clout**

When a wildfire broke out at the edge of the Sun Valley ski resort near Ketchum, Idaho, last August, locals were dismayed to see no firefighting aircraft overhead.

The planes were busy fighting other fires deemed higher priority by NIFC. So Sun Valley homeowners and businesspeople began working the phones. In short order, they had the state's most powerful politicians pressing their case.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and U.S. Sen. Michael D. Crapo, both Republicans, called NIFC, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, even the White House.

"People wanted more aircraft. Our office did put pressure on NIFC," said Crapo's press secretary, Lindsay Nothern. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

Other elected officials did their part. State Sen. Clint Stennett, a Democrat whose district includes Sun Valley, told federal officials that the fire threatened property valued at \$10 billion. He didn't need to remind them that the resort's part-time residents include California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, U.S. Sen. John Kerry, high-powered business executives and movie stars.

"There's a significant amount of political influence in this community, and we don't hesitate to use it," Stennett said.

The lobbying blitz turned a low-priority fire into a high-priority one.

"Once the governor started making noise, well, then the aircraft started moving in our direction," Jeanne Pincha-Tulley, the Forest Service incident commander on the Sun Valley fire, recalled with a laugh. "When you go to the White House like Butch was doing, it's got to have some effect. We started getting stuff. It was the most beautiful air show you have ever seen in your life."

At its peak, the fleet of contract aircraft at Pincha-Tulley's disposal included 19 helicopters and several air tankers. She said she was happy to have the resources and did not consider them excessive. But for much of the time, the aircraft were grounded by 70-mph winds.

The fire was brought under control in about three weeks, with no loss of life or property and at a cost estimated at \$39 million. Aerial firefighting accounted for about 24% of the total.

Hulbert, the Forest Service aviation chief and a veteran of California wildfires, nodded in recognition when asked about political meddling. "I'll say this: In this region, there are a lot of political and economic pressures. But you just cannot fly in 20- to 25-mph winds and be effective," he said. "The poor incident commander is stuck in the middle between the cost issue and the political pressure... ."

"I've had a case where I got a call -- I won't tell you who it was -- and I was told to put a helicopter in the air. I just couldn't do it."

### **Calling in the military**

Fire commanders say that politicians are especially keen to mobilize military aircraft when wildfires are burning.

Dale Gardner directed federal firefighting on the 2002 Kraft Complex fire, which charred 48,000 acres of North Dakota prairie.

Gov. John Hoeven dispatched two National Guard helicopters "that we had no need for," Gardner

recalled. There were sufficient ground forces and civilian aircraft to handle the situation, he said.

"But it was pretty clear he wanted to see those [helicopters] working on our fire," said Gardner, now retired. "We used them. It was obvious the politics of the situation dictated that we better drop some water with those helicopters."

Hoeven's office referred a request for comment to the North Dakota National Guard. Greg Wilz, director of military support operations for the Guard during the fire, said the helicopters were "partially effective."

"Dropping 150 gallons at a few hundred feet on a fire is literally a drop in the bucket," he said, but he added that the helicopters were able to reach parts of the fire that ground crews could not.

Elaine Zieroth, former supervisor of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona, said she felt similar pressure to use military planes when a big blaze broke out in her domain in June 2004.

Earlier that year, federal officials had grounded private air tankers after a series of accidents, and Arizona politicians arranged for two C-130s to be stationed in the state as a stop-gap.

Rep. Rick Renzi, a Republican from Flagstaff, issued a news release touting the deployment and his role in arranging it: "Today, Arizona stands in a stronger, safer position to fight fires and protect our rural communities."

When the Three Forks fire erupted in the national forest, Zieroth said, the Forest Service's regional office gave her some advice: Whatever you do, call in the C-130s.

"The politicians had lobbied to get these military air tankers," said Zieroth, who retired last year. "We ordered them, but we probably wouldn't have if we hadn't been advised it would be a good political move."

The tankers were too big and flew too high to make accurate drops of retardant in the forest's rough terrain, said Zieroth, who watched the C-130s in action from another plane.

"A lot of the retardant just overshot the fire," she said.

For every two C-130s dispatched to a fire, a third follows to carry equipment and support personnel. The military tankers mobilized for this summer's California wildfires cost nearly \$12,000 per hour of flight time, records show. Much of the cost of such missions is billed to the Forest Service.

During the 2003 Cedar fire in San Diego County, commanders had civilian tankers available but couldn't use them because of high winds. Quintanar, a 34-year veteran of wildland fires, said that was why he resisted Rep. Hunter's demand for military aircraft.

"The pilots couldn't see; the windshields were pitted with dirt," recalled Quintanar, now retired from the Forest Service. "It's beyond dangerous."

But because of the severity of the fire, which ultimately killed 15 people and destroyed nearly 5,000 structures, pressure to get more aircraft on the scene was intense.

Once the weather eased, the C-130s dispatched by the Pentagon in response to Hunter's lobbying unleashed 154,000 gallons of retardant. But Quintanar said the drops added little to what civilian aircraft had already accomplished.

"It was a politician trying to play fireman and thinking the answer was air tankers," he said.

### **Wildfire workhorses**

The big money on fires is expended on high-performance helicopters, which fire bosses love for their versatility. They can often fly when wind or weather ground fixed-wing aircraft. Commanders use them to ferry personnel and supplies as well as to drop water and retardant.

On a single day of last year's Zaca fire in Los Padres National Forest, the use of one Sikorsky S-64 heavy-lift helicopter cost taxpayers nearly \$65,000 -- \$32,760 to keep the machine on standby for 14 hours and \$6,370 per hour for five hours of flight time, Forest Service records show. By the end of that week, the bill for the helicopter had reached \$368,645. Dozens of helicopters worked the Zaca during the four months it took to put the fire out.

To rein in aviation costs, Forest Service officials have tried to curb unnecessary use of helicopters. Internal memos have taken aim at "heli-mopping" -- using the aircraft to douse remnants of a fire or to perform chores that ground crews could do more effectively.

The leasing of helicopters is only part of their cost. Whereas air tankers fly from established bases, helicopters need bases near a fire, which have to be created ad hoc, often in backcountry lacking roads, utilities and water.

Forest Service contracting officers lease land from property owners. Heavy equipment sometimes has to be brought in to carve roads and clear terrain. Water trucks are hired to keep dust down.

Pilots, mechanics, fueling crews and other support personnel must be transported to the scene and provided with food, water, supplies and a place to sleep. A team of emergency medical personnel is required at all times.

During the Zaca fire, the government paid Tower Tech Inc. of Meadow Vista, Calif., \$4,700 a day for a portable air traffic control tower and two air traffic specialists.

ICL Performance Products in Ontario operated a mobile retardant mixing station for a base fee of \$3,345 per day, plus \$1,000 to \$4,000 in daily operating charges. The retardant itself cost an additional \$2,095 a ton; water to mix it was delivered by a \$1,761-a-day truck.

Such outlays can continue for months on a wildland fire.

One of the busiest companies in aerial firefighting is Aero Union Corp. of Chico. It flies eight fixed-wing P-3 Orion tankers under contract with the Forest Service. The company also produces the pressurized tank system that C-130s use to drop retardant.

Aero Union has been awarded federal fire-suppression contracts totaling at least \$169 million since 2000, government records show.

Columbia Helicopters of Aurora, Ore., secured nearly \$90 million in fire contracts with the Forest Service over the same period, the records show. The company's heavy-lift helicopters also remove timber from national forests.

Some aviation companies are politically active. Executives and employees of Columbia, for instance, contributed more than \$400,000 to federal candidates and election committees in the last 10 years, according to campaign finance records. In its home state, the company made \$868,000 in political donations over the same period.

Columbia President Michael A. Fahey said in an e-mail that the contributions "have never been made to create influence. . . . We believe our unrivaled capabilities and exceptional efforts on the fire lines speak entirely for themselves."

Aviation contractors, including many smaller companies, look after their interests in Washington through Helicopter Assn. International. The trade group has reported spending \$856,000 lobbying Congress over the last 10 years on a variety of issues, including funding for wildland firefighting.

### **Skirting the rules**

Under firefighting protocols, military aircraft are to be sent to a fire only if no civilian planes are available and only if federal or state officials ask for help. In reality, elected leaders frequently finesse these rules.

Among the most forceful advocates for using military aircraft is Hunter, a former Army Ranger and the ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee.

When wildfires swept Southern California last October, Hunter again got on the phone asking for C-130s. This time, he reached Lt. Gen. Steven Blum, head of the National Guard Bureau, in Washington. Blum was willing to send the planes, but there was a hitch. Neither the state of California nor the Forest Service had requested military assistance.

"I said, 'Can you launch the planes?' " Hunter recalled. "He [Blum] thought about it for a minute and said, 'We'll send 'em out, and we'll call it a training mission.' We got the planes."

Nine C-130s were dispatched from bases around the country -- six to fight the fires and three to carry equipment and 150 support personnel, all of whom were put up in hotels at public expense.

In all, the deployment cost taxpayers \$5.5 million.

Putting military planes or helicopters in the crowded skies above a fire requires careful coordination between Forest Service and military personnel. Military aircraft use different radio and navigational systems than civilian planes, and their crews use different terminology to communicate in the air.

To promote safety and efficiency, state officials normally insist that a civilian air manager, sometimes called a spotter, accompany each military helicopter flying on a California fire.

The requirement led to delays in getting military helicopters aloft during last fall's wildfires; at one point, there weren't enough spotters to go around.

After heated discussions with elected officials, Cal Fire agreed to assign one spotter for every three military helicopters.

Hunter, who makes no secret of his impatience with the Forest Service bureaucracy, has pushed legislation to speed the process for mobilizing military planes during wildfires. He suggested that fire managers are slow to request military aircraft because they want to give business to private contractors.

Incident commanders say they're reluctant for different reasons: The big military tankers cost a lot and often aren't effective.

L. Dean Clark was fire management officer at the Chiricahua National Monument in southeast Arizona when the 1994 Rattlesnake fire broke out in the Chiricahua Mountains.

Clark recalled standing with a group of ranchers as they watched C-130s release clouds of retardant high above steep canyons and rugged pine forests.

"It was a pointless exercise in humidity-raising," said Clark, now retired. "They couldn't get in close enough to do much good. The feds needed to be showing the citizens they were doing everything they could to put out the fire. . . . It was a laughable example of a waste of federal money."

Long before it reached the ground, the retardant had dissipated into a mist.

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