**U.S. Firefighting Airtanker Modernization Impeded**

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*Protests and delays hamper U.S. efforts to modernize its aging aerial firefighting fleet*

*Printed headline: Airtanker Angst*

The U.S. will be facing yet another fire season with a dwindling number of aging airtankers. More than a year after the release of a solicitation for Next Generation Airtanker Services by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), progress toward a fleet of modern firefighting aircraft, adequate to meet the growing threat of increasingly destructive wildland fires, has been limited. The USFS has estimated a requirement for 24-28 next-generation airtankers within five years.

Under the Nov. 30, 2011, request for proposals (RFP), the Fire Service planned to award exclusive-use operating contracts of up to five years to companies providing land-based, turbine-powered airtankers. The USFS specified an aircraft with at least a 300-kt. cruise speed and a minimum dispensable payload of 2,400 gal. of fire retardant—on takeoff on an ISA+30F day at sea level and zero wind—with a 6,000-ft. maximum ground roll on take off. The agency also mandated aircraft still supported by the original manufacturer.

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| [ArticleImage](http://www.aviationweek.com/aw_images/large/AW_02_04_2013_403_l.jpg) |
| **Neptune Aviation Services has two modified ex-airline BAe 146s flying for the U.S. Fire Service under interim contracts.** *Credit: Neptune Aviation* |

Nine companies responded to the RFP by its closing date in February 2012. In June, the USFS announced its intent to award contracts to Missoula, Mont.-based Neptune Aviation Services; Minden Air Corp., in Minden, Nev.; Aero Flite of Kingman, Fla., and Aero Air of Hillsboro, Ore. The four companies were to provide a total of seven next-generation airtankers, a mix of modified ex-airline BAe 146s and McDonnell Douglas MD-87s—with three in 2012 and four more in 2013. But almost immediately protests were filed with the [Government Accountability Office (GAO)](http://www.aviationweek.com/awin/OrganizationProfiles.aspx?orgId=16920) by two losing companies--10 Tanker Air Carrier of Adelanto, Calif., and Coulson Aviation (USA) of Port Alberni, British Columbia.

The Fire Service had budgeted $261 million for the seven airtankers, based on 250 flight hours a year per aircraft. Neptune Aviation and Minden Air were each to supply two BAe 146s, while Aero Air was to provide two MD-87s, and Aero-Flite was to operate a single Avro RJ85, a version of the BAe 146.

Rick Hatton, 10 Tanker Air Carrier president, argues that because of the limitations the USFS imposed on the aircraft's retardant capacity, it effectively disqualified his company 's two modified McDonnell Douglas DC-10s, each with an 11,600-gal. capacity. “Our argument was that we were being penalized because our aircraft had more capacity than they could use, which totally disregards the economies of scale and efficiencies this excess capability would provide,” he says.

The GAO dismissed the protests in September, when the Forest Service agreed that certain points in the solicitation were in need of clarification and issued a new RFP to the nine bidders—with any original or revised proposals due Nov. 1, 2012. Those proposals are currently under evaluation and no decision date has been announced. According to a USFS spokeswoman, the decision, when it comes, could spark a new round of protests , further delaying a contract award.

With a looming fire season, the U.S. fleet of large airtankers , which numbered 41 in 2004, is down to 10, according to Dan Snyder, chief operating officer of Neptune Aviation. The current fleet, he explains, includes seven Neptune-operated former U.S. Navy Lockheed P2V Neptune patrol aircraft and two BAe 146 regional airliners that have been modified as airtankers, with 3,000-gal. tanks. An additional P2V is operated by Minden Air .

To date, Neptune Aviation Services is the only operator which has successfully fielded a modern airtanker with its two BAe 146 jets, Snyder says, and is bringing on additional aircraft even without a multi-year USFS contract .

During the 2012 fire season , both aircraft flew a total of 300 hr., dropping 1.5 million gal. of fire retardant. As Snyder points out, during this period, Neptune Aviation gained“significant operational experience” with the aircraft, which have been flying under an interim USFS certification. “Significant improvements have been made to the aircraft's tanking and retardant delivery system, and we expect full USFS certification—with the changes—by June of this year,” he says.

Neptune Aviation expects to have five BAe 146s by early summer. All of the airframes have been acquired from Tronosjet Maintenance of Prince Edward Island, Canada, which also supplied the engineering and tanking system modification for the first two aircraft . However, for all additional tankers, Neptune Aviation will perform the tank system installations, in-house, at its Missoula facility. Tronosjet will continue to supply the airframes, and assist in an engineering and maintenance support role. Long term, the operator is projecting 11-15 BAe 146 tankers, contingent upon Forest Service needs.

“We know that a requirement for a next-generation tanker fleet exists. We will have six remaining P2Vs left in our fleet after March, and they have five to six years of useful structural life left,” says Snyder.