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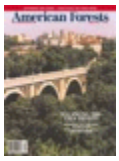

Article: The great airtanker debacle. (US Forest Service firefighting airtanker fleet)(includes related articles)

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Article from: American Forests Article date: May 1, 1994 Author: McLean, Herbert E. Copyright

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The "flight plan" seemed simple: To update an aging airtanker fleet used for firefighting, the Forest Service encouraged some of its contract private airtanker operators to swap their older planes for newer, government excess models through a little-known exchange program. Then things went off course.

The headlines appearing last year in the Los Angeles Times, The Oregonian, and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer grabbed my attention like a field of poison-tipped cacti.

I pondered those startling articles, wondering how on earth the United States Forest Service, with its tanned silviculturists, friendly fireside naturalists, and eager ecosystem managers, could suddenly be bathed in such dubious illumination.

More particularly, as a forest journalist I began wondering how such a foul-up, involving critically needed aircraft, might affect our nation's forest firefighting capability at a moment of historic wildfire concern.

Fifty phone conversations and more than 60 pages of incoming FAXed data later, I found myself hopelessly removed from the forests I love. Instead, I was enmeshed in a veritable dog-hair thicket of ever-expanding and oft-conflicting allegations, sworn statements, documentary backup, newspaper reports, and fervent denials, plus a fabric of claims concerning Forest Service-Central Intelligence Agency connections that stretch continents away to places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Angola.

The cast of characters? A document-toting government whistle blower-extraordinaire from Washington State, several Congressmen (Republican and Democratic), a resourceful Oregon airplane broker who made some big bucks, a ticked-off airtanker pilot, assorted Department of Agriculture and Forest Service officials (one of them fired)--the list goes on.

I can only agree with former Forest Service Chief Dale Robertson, who admitted to a House subcommittee last August (1993) in a mountainous understatement, "This has been poorly managed by the Forest Service."

Let's enter the shady thicket.

THE TRADE-OFF

In 1988 the Forest Service, needing to update an aging firefighting airtanker fleet experiencing structural failures and some fatal crashes, used the little-known Historical Aircraft Exchange Program to move newer, "government excess" C-30A Hercules and P-3A Orion turboprop aircraft from the military into the hands of its private-contractor airtanker fleet. The Forest Service selected four airtanker companies in the western U.S. and encouraged them to trade some of their older tankers--many dating back to World War II --for large, …

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Article: Lawmakers Want Newer Fire Equipment
AP Online; August 5, 2002 ; 700+ words ... ... policy for the U.S. **Forest Service**. Debra Bennett ... military value. The **Forest Service** owns no planes ... to have a viable **airtanker fleet** in the future then ... provide some help." **Forest Service** officials, contractors ...

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