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Nation's largest air tanker to fight California wildfires



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The Press-Enterprise

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The nation's largest firefighting air tanker is available to fight Inland wildfires this year under a contract signed this month between Cal Fire and the Oregon company that owns the Boeing 747 jumbo jet.

The air tanker can carry up to 20,000 gallons of water or fire retardant -- roughly seven times the capacity of conventional tankers -- and delivers its payload under pressure with about 50,000 pounds of thrust.

"It's the only plane like this in existence," said Bill Payne, aviation chief for Cal Fire.

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Special to The Press-Enterprise

The Boeing 747, the nation's largest firefighting air tanker, can carry up to 20,000 gallons of water or fire retardant — seven times the capacity of conventional tankers — and delivers its payload under pressure with about 50,000 pounds of thrust.

The supertanker is based in Marana, Ariz., but when activated for duty throughout California, it will fly out of Victorville or McClellan Airport in Sacramento, Payne said.

Cal Fire will pay Evergreen International Aviation Inc. of McMinnville, Ore., \$29,500 an hour, plus the cost of fuel, with a minimum of four hours per day guaranteed any day the plane is used. The contract calls for paying for a minimum of 10 days at a cost of \$1.183 million, regardless of whether the plane is used, Payne said.

The jumbo jet underwent a five-year, \$55 million conversion from cargo jet to air tanker, said Jim Baynes, the Evergreen Supertanker sales manager.

Baynes said the supertanker offers speed and versatility not available from other firefighting air tankers.

"We're the equivalent of eight to 10 air tankers being used now," Baynes said.

By contrast, the Martin Mars tanker that the U.S. Forest Service plans to stage in Lake Elsinore has a capacity of 7,200 gallons.

While conventional water-dropping tankers travel at 250 miles per hour, the supertanker reaches speeds of 600 miles per hour.

"That gives us a tremendous amount of range," he said.

Cal Fire's Payne said the agency began augmenting its firefighting ability after safety concerns grounded much of the U.S. Forest Service's large tankers.

In 2006 a DC-10 supertanker, with a capacity of 12,000 gallons, was put under contract by Cal Fire. It is based in Victorville and has daily staffing from June 15 to the end of October -- which is considered the peak wildfire season.

This year another DC-10 supertanker was put under contract on an "as-needed basis," Payne said.

Cal Fire also maintains its own fleet of 23 air tankers, which each have a capacity of 1,200 gallons of water or fire retardant.

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