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US Forest Service Cancels Airtanker Contract with Aero Union *California company did not meet agency's safety standards*

WASHINGTON, July 29, 2011 -- The U.S. Forest Service announced today that it has terminated its contract with Aero Union of Sacramento, Calif., because the company failed to meet its contractual obligations. The company was providing six airtankers under exclusive-use contracts to the Forest Service.

"Our main priority is protecting and saving lives, and we can't in good conscience maintain an aviation contract where we feel lives may be put at risk due to inadequate safety practices" said Tom Harbour, director of the Forest Service's Fire and Aviation Management program. "This contract termination notwithstanding, we possess the aircraft support needed for this year's fire season."

The Forest Service has access to additional aviation assets to meet operational needs. Two other private companies provide 11 large airtankers under exclusive-use contracts. In addition, there are two very large airtankers available through a "call when needed" contract, as well as eight military firefighting aircraft.

The five-year contract the Forest Service signed with Aero Union in 2008 required participation in a continued airworthiness program, which included a Fatigue and Damage Tolerance Evaluation and structural inspection program. In April 2011, Aero Union informed the Forest Service that the Federal Aviation Administration found the company was not in compliance with its mandated structural inspection program requirements.

Because of the extraordinary stresses placed on aircraft during aerial firefighting and to prevent catastrophic failures and ensure safety, the Forest Service adds requirements to its airtanker contracts that are specific to the agency's firefighting mission. The Forest Service will not use aircraft that do not meet its requirements.

The mission of the USDA Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The Agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to State and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world.

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