AERIAL FIREFIGHTERS CLOSE OUT 2015 FIRE SEASON, WITH INNOVATIONS FOR 2016 UNDERWAY

News / Airlines

The aerial firefighting industry is already preparing for what could be another intense period, as it winds down from one of the most destructive wildland fire seasons ever experienced in the American west, particularly in California and the Pacific Northwest.

"The helicopter and fixed wing aerial tanker companies once again proved their reliability and readiness to deploy their aircraft at a moment's notice, as wildland fires decimated literally hundreds of square miles, and in some cases, wiped entire towns off the map," said George Hill, Executive Director of the American Helicopter Services and Aerial Firefighting Association (AHSAFA). "As with 2015, the industry is anticipating an early start to next year's fire season, as dry conditions in much of country continue to prevail."

The 2015 fire season, in fact, could be seen as an industry landmark, in which privately owned operators undertook major equipment upgrades and fleet modernization. Helimax Aviation, Inc., for example, put its three former US Army Boeing CH 47D Chinook heavy helicopters in service for the first time last year. Of those, two operated some 400 hours, under US Forest Service (USFS)

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and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFIRE) contracts. The Sacramento-based company also commenced a development program for a 2,800 gallon internal tank for CH 47D retrofit. The tank system, which will disperse water or fire retardant, is slated for approval by the FAA under a supplemental type certificate (STC) by February 2016, according to Larry Kelley, Helimax Aviation's Director of Fire Operations. With one of the Chinooks currently deployed to Australia, the remaining two, said Kelley, are being bid for USFS exclusive use contracts in 2016.

In addition to the Chinooks, the Helimax fleet includes a heavy Sikorski S-61, a Bell 212, and five Bell 205A1++ medium helicopters. Kelley reported that the company has further expanded the fleet with a leased Eurocopter AS350B-3E light helicopter for operation under USFS and CALFIRE call when needed contracts.

Also deploying the CH-47D for the first time was Portland, Oregon-based Columbia Helicopters, which completed certification work on the one-time military helicopter last year, and placed it under a USFS exclusive use contract. "Along with the Chinook, Columbia had six additional aircraft working fires across the Western US and in Alaska--four Columbia Vertol 107-IIs and two Columbia Model 234s," said Dan Sweet Columbia Helicopters Public Relations Manager. "Several of our aircraft were extended on their contracts, including one Model 234 Chinook that was picked up by the California Department of Forestry. During the course of our fire season, the fleet was deployed on 73 wildland fires, dropping over 21 million gallons of water.

Andrew Mills, Vice-President, Commercial Services for Erickson Incorporated, reported that the Portland, Oregon-headquartered company set a company record for flight hours—for its US operations—in August, using its S-64 Aircrane heavy lift helicopters. Mills reported that Erickson deployed 17 Aircranes, supported by more than 160 personnel, including pilots and ground crews, as the fire season reached historic proportions in California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho throughout the summer. Mills also pointed out that Erickson supplied four additional aircraft consisting of a combination of light and medium helicopters, for fire suppression missions in Alaska.

In August, the company announced newly designed and certified enhancements for the Aircranes to improve pilot situational awareness. "That included the installation of Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) OUT (transmit) systems which are ADS-B IN (receive) systems," Mills noted. "They are combined with state of the art GPS units with Helicopter Terrain and Awareness System (HTAWS), providing flight crews with real time visual and audible information for terrain and obstacles in and around the helicopter."

Intermountain Helicopter president Rick Livingston reported that his single Bell 212 medium helicopter is undergoing routine winter maintenance in preparation for a third year of work under a four year USFS exclusive use contract. Headquartered in Sonora, California, the helicopter has been flying from a base near the Gallatin National Forest in Montana for the past several years, primarily engaged in rappelling services, which transport firefighters and equipment into the fire zones. Livingston noted that the company flew 300 hours this past year, of which most was during August and September, due to heavy fire activity in Montana.

Over the past year, air tanker operator Neptune Aviation Services of Missoula, Montana, took further steps toward transitioning its fixed wing fleet from Korean War era, twin-piston engine P2V Neptunes to its converted BAe 146 regional jets. The company operated six of the jet tankers in 2015, along with six P2Vs. "For the first time in the company's history, our entire active fleet was under contract," explained Dan Snyder, Chief Operating Officer. "That included a BAe 146 flying on an exclusive use contract for CALFIRE—for the first time."

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In preparation for 2016, in November, Neptune Aviation completed its seventh BAe 146 tanker conversion project at its Missoula maintenance facility. The company also secured four more next generation BAe 146 aerial tanker contracts with the USFS for the 2016 season, transitioning four aircraft from call when needed contracts. The newly-awarded exclusive use contracts have a 10-year potential, if the USFS exercises all its options, Snyder reported.

Neptune Aviation Services fleet is currently undergoing winter maintenance, but with a propensity for earlier fire seasons, several aircraft and the personnel need to support those aircraft will be mission ready in January. "In most years, the needed availability was by March," said Snyder. "But this year, our policy is to be prepared earlier than usual."

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