

USFS firefighting air fleet inadequate

By W.J. Hennigan, Los Angeles Times

The blaze near Yosemite National Park had incinerated scores of acres and was spreading fast. It was time, federal officials decided, to attack it from the air with all the resources at their command.

As the nation's armada of air tankers began landing at a staging area near here, it was clear that this was a fleet from another era.

The planes showed their age. Propellers coughed to a stop and smoke spewed from their piston engines. Many of these restored tankers were built during the Eisenhower administration.

The Forest Service fleet, which drops retardant to give firefighters on the ground crucial time to put out raging wildfires, is too old, industry and government officials say. Because there are so few planes, critics contend, the fleet is no longer capable of doing all it should to contain fires. Over the last decade, the service reduced its fleet from 47 to just 12, all operated by businesses under federal contract.

Critics also say the planes are dangerous. Since 2001, tanker crashes have killed 22 aviators. Six died last year.

"It's pathetic," said Tony Kern, former Forest Service chief of aviation. "We have brave aviators using ancient technologies and as a result they're losing their lives. It's a horrifying fact that won't change unless government action is taken."

Since 2001, tanker crashes have killed 22 aviators. Six died last year.

Demands that the Forest Service replace these planes have come from former pilots, government officials, firefighter advocacy groups and CalFire.

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