

Debate over use of jumbo bomber as wildfires rage



Planes like the Super Scooper are the U.S. Forest Service's choice for fire suppression. Photo/LTN file

By Keith Ridler, AP

A giant aircraft that can fly high above oceans on intercontinental flights instead jets in low and slow over a flaming forest, trailing a long plume that settles on the ground and creates a wildfire-stopping barrier.

The operators of the Boeing 747 converted from a passenger jet into a firefighting air tanker say it has proven itself battling forest fires in countries outside the U.S. The modifications allow it to drop more than 19,000 gallons of a flame-squelching combination of ammonium phosphate and sulfate mixed with water that comes billowing out in a red-colored line.

"We just happen to be the biggest, fastest firetruck in the

air,” said Jim Wheeler, CEO of Global SuperTanker Services.

But the company says the U.S. Forest Service is seeking to keep the plane grounded by offering a contract limiting firefighting aircraft to 5,000 gallons of fire suppressant and won’t say why. The company says the federal agency is putting homes and lives at risk just as the current wildfire season surges past the 10-year average for land area burned in a decade that includes some of the most destructive and deadly wildfire seasons on record.

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