

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-684](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service and Interior contract for aircraft to perform various firefighting functions, including airtankers that drop retardant. The Forest Service contracts for large airtankers and certain other aircraft, while Interior contracts for smaller airtankers and water scoopers.

However, a decrease in the number of large airtankers, from 44 in 2002 to 8 in early 2013—due to aging planes and several fatal crashes—has led to concerns about the agencies' ability to provide aerial firefighting support.

GAO was asked to review agency efforts to ensure the adequacy of the firefighting aircraft fleet. This report examines (1) Forest Service and Interior efforts to identify the number and type of firefighting aircraft they need and (2) the Forest Service's approach to modernizing the large airtanker fleet and the challenges it faces in doing so. GAO reviewed agency studies and strategies, assessing the extent to which they included key elements important for understanding fire aviation needs; reviewed large airtanker planning and acquisition documents; and interviewed agency officials and representatives of the fire aviation community selected to represent state agencies, aircraft vendors, and others.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the Forest Service and Interior expand efforts to collect information on the performance and effectiveness of firefighting aircraft and enhance collaboration across agencies and the fire aviation community. The agencies generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-13-684](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

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WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Improvements Needed in Information, Collaboration, and Planning to Enhance Federal Fire Aviation Program Success

What GAO Found

The Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have undertaken nine major efforts since 1995 to identify the number and type of firefighting aircraft they need, but those efforts—consisting of major studies and strategy documents—have been hampered by limited information and collaboration. Specifically, the studies and strategy documents did not incorporate information on the performance and effectiveness of firefighting aircraft, primarily because neither agency collected such data. While government reports have long called for the Forest Service and Interior to collect aircraft performance information, neither agency did so until 2012 when the Forest Service began a data collection effort. However, the Forest Service has collected limited data on large airtankers and no other aircraft, and Interior has not initiated a data collection effort. In addition, although firefighting aircraft are often shared by federal agencies and can be deployed to support firefighting operations on federal and nonfederal lands, the agencies have not consistently collaborated with one another and other stakeholders to identify the firefighting aircraft they need. Many agency officials and stakeholders GAO contacted noted concerns about limited collaboration, and many cited shortcomings with the formal mechanism for collaboration—the National Interagency Aviation Committee. The committee has implemented some leading practices for collaboration such as defining and articulating a common purpose, but it has not taken additional steps to monitor and evaluate its collaborative activities, another leading practice. Collectively, additional information on aircraft performance and effectiveness and collaboration across agencies and with stakeholders could enhance agency estimates of their firefighting aircraft needs to more accurately represent national needs for such aircraft, and as a result, better position the agencies to develop strategic planning documents that represent those needs.

The Forest Service plans to modernize the large airtanker fleet by obtaining large airtankers from various sources over the near, medium, and long term, but each component of this approach faces challenges that make the continued availability of such aircraft to meet national fire suppression needs uncertain. In the near term, the agency plans to rely on a mix of contracted "legacy" airtankers as well as supplemental aircraft available through additional contracts and agreements with other governments and the military. However, agency concerns exist regarding the availability, capability, and costs of these resources. In the medium term, the Forest Service has awarded contracts for "next-generation" large airtankers that are faster and more up-to-date than most "legacy" aircraft, but it is uncertain when all of these aircraft will begin supporting fire suppression activities. Specifically, bid protests delayed contract issuance, and most of the aircraft receiving awards have not been fully tested and approved. In the long term, the Forest Service's plan includes purchasing certain large airtankers and obtaining others through intergovernmental transfer at no initial cost if they are declared surplus by the military—a shift from its long-standing practice of contracting for rather than owning aircraft. However, the Forest Service was unable to justify its previous plans for purchasing large airtankers to the Office of Management and Budget, and concerns exist regarding the retardant capacity and operating cost of the other airtankers it would obtain through intergovernmental transfer.