

# No New Parts, Support For C-130 Wildfire System

Mead Gruver, Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — The demise of the only company that manufactured a device specially designed to spray fire retardant from the back of U.S. military C-130 cargo planes has some experts worried about the future viability of a program that has helped fight wildfires for 40 years.

The Modular Airborne Firefighting System is a bus-sized device that can be shoved into the belly of a cargo plane and then used to spray retardant, or slurry, at 3,000 gallons in less than 5 seconds. The \$4.9 million device's only manufacturer, Sacramento, Calif.-based Aero Union, went out of business in August, and no other company has replaced it. Critical spare parts also are no longer being made.

The MAFFS C130s are operated by three National Guard and one reserve unit in Wyoming, Colorado, North Carolina and California. Wyoming's MAFFS have been deployed as far away as Indonesia. Last year, MAFFS C-130s flew to wildfires in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oregon and Mexico. They've been critical again this year against wildfires in Colorado, Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota.

"Thank God we have them. Can you imagine if we didn't have them?" said Tony Morris with the Wildfire Research Network, a Pacific Palisades, Calif., group that advocates for improved means to fight wildfires.

"At what point can we maintain control, or at what point do these fires burn out of control?"

Aero Union closed after the U.S. Forest Service canceled a contract worth a guaranteed minimum \$14.5 million a year for firefighting services by six P-3 Orion air tankers. The Forest Service said Aero Union wasn't keeping up with inspections for those planes.

Aero Union is contesting the revocation in federal administrative court. Dallas-based Comerica bank foreclosed on Aero Union and offered the MAFFS-related assets at auction last winter. They failed to sell.

A bank spokesman declined to discuss any plans for those assets.

The Forest Service has stockpiled enough major parts, can source many smaller parts, and can mend the biggest parts no longer being made to keep the system running, said Scott Fisher, MAFFS coordinator for the Forest Service.

"The system was built for at least 20 years," he said. "I would not be surprised to see this thing fly for a full 30 years."

Eight of the planes were flying until a North Carolina Air National Guard C130

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crashed in South Dakota on July 1, the first major accident in MAFFS program history. The crash killed four of six crew members and was still being investigated.

Forest Service officials said it was too soon to say if the MAFFS device on board, or any portion of it, might be salvageable.

"They can probably patch them up. But I think there may still be some issues on the unit itself where they may need an engineering team to get in there and work out any bugs," said Mike Archer, a wildfire consultant in Glendora, Calif.

The loss of technical help, especially, could prove troublesome while the Forest Service works out bugs in the latest-generation MAFFS II system in use since last year, he suggested.

"They haven't really used them enough, I don't think, to find out some of the problems," Archer said of the Forest Service and its workers contracted to maintain the MAFFS.

Forest Service officials insist the system is and will remain viable for years to come.

Meanwhile, the Forest Service has contracted technicians in California, Wyoming and Idaho to maintain the MAFFS. An in-house engineer at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, can help troubleshoot any bugs, Fisher said.

"In any new system you're going to have some issues come up, and we've been able to work through them," Fisher said.

Aero Union's last chief executive, Britt Gourley of Seattle, declined to comment on the system's continued viability.

"I may have my personal opinions, but I keep them to myself. I don't know. I wish the Forest Service well and wish all the folks involved well," Gourley said.

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