U.S. Forest Service Offers Preview of C-130H Airtankers

The U.S. Forest Service airtanker fleet will, as soon as practicable, include seven C-130H aircraft that previously belonged to the U.S. Coast Guard, as authorized by the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

The C-130H aircraft were designed and operated for military purposes and will need to be configured, modified, equipped, and staffed to perform wildfire suppression missions before they can be brought into service. That includes a paint job to remove the U.S. Coast Guard name and logo and to make the appearance of the C-130Hs consistent with other aircraft in the U.S. Forest Service fleet. The U.S. Coast Guard is transferring the C-130Hs to the U.S. Air Force, which will perform the work and then transfer the aircraft to the U.S. Forest Service when it is completed.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell has approved the following paint scheme for the C-130H airtankers:

The U.S. Forest Service will own the C-130Hs and will contract with private industry to operate and maintain them. “The C-130H aircraft will play an important role by augmenting the airtanker fleet as the U.S. Forest Service continues to work to implement the Large Airtanker Modernization Strategy the agency submitted to Congress in February, 2012,” said Tom Harbour, Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service. The strategy recommends 18 to 28 “Next Generation” airtankers that can fly faster and drop more retardant than “Legacy” airtankers. In June, 2013 the U.S. Forest Service awarded contracts for 7 Next Generation airtankers and is working to bring all of them into service this year.

The 2014 NDAA also authorized the Department of Defense to transfer 15 Shorts C-23Bs (Sherpas) to the U.S. Forest Service to deliver smokejumpers and cargo and to perform other wildfire support missions.