



# Trade Release



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## National Business Center Aviation Management Directorate and U.S. Forest Service Sign First-Ever Joint Authorization Letter for Use of Very Large Air Tankers (VLAT)

### Result of Groundbreaking Tri-Agency Collaboration with National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

WASHINGTON - Since 1958, the interagency aerial firefighting community has experienced a pattern of mishaps, resulting in 136 Large Air Tanker fatalities and periodic in-flight structural failures. This has resulted in significant human, financial, equipment, and credibility cost to the interagency fire aviation community over many decades.



Pat Norbury, National Aviation Operations Officer, USFS Aviation Management and Mark Bathrick, Associate Director NBC Aviation Management sign VLAT authorization

As part of a concerted interagency effort to break this chain and improve the safety of aerial firefighting, in the summer of 2008 the National Business Center (NBC) Aviation Management Directorate (AMD) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) embarked on a groundbreaking tri-agency partnership with

NASA to bring a new science-based approach to the suitability assessment of aerial firefighting aircraft. The subject of this effort was a new class of air tanker, the Very Large Air Tanker. Very Large Air Tankers (VLAT) are defined as air tankers over 255,000 lbs certificated gross take off weight and able to carry in excess of 11,000 gallons of fire retardant. Former passenger/cargo aircraft like B-747's and DC-10's are included in this category.

"The National Business Center is proud to have played a role in this ground breaking effort. AMD's leveraging of interagency partnerships...reflects their commitment to quality and continual improvement as an ISO-9001-2008 certified aviation shared service provider."

Douglas J. Bourgeois  
NBC Director

Leveraging the combined firefighting mission, aviation management, engineering, and flight test expertise within AMD, USFS, and NASA, the team developed an industry proven aircraft



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assessment program to examine the suitability of the VLAT class of aircraft for the aerial firefighting role. The assessment analyzed available technical data, utilized state-of the-art manned flight simulators, and limited airborne evaluations. Airworthiness of the VLAT class for the aerial firefighting role, aircraft compatibility with mission requirements, and operational policies and procedures were all examined within a mission context to determine suitability. The resulting 387 page NASA report provided significant technical detail regarding VLAT performance, airworthiness, and suitability for the aerial firefighting role. In April 2009, NASA engineers and flight test pilots, along with AMD and USFS aviation management provided managers at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise with a comprehensive review of the VLAT assessment process, findings, and recommendations. “I can’t overemphasize the significance of this unique NASA-USFS-DOI aviation partnership and the new science-based approach that was employed in this assessment,” said Mark Bathrick, AMD Associate Director. “This same approach can be applied to those aircraft currently used in aerial firefighting as a way to continue improvements in mission effectiveness, efficiency, and safety while also successfully addressing issues raised in previous oversight agency reviews of the aerial firefighting mission.”



The recommendations derived from the NASA assessment served as the foundation for the development of a first-ever joint DOI-USFS authorization letter for a new class of firefighting aircraft. Also unique to this authorization is that it is the first to provide policy for utilization of the aircraft while providing fire managers with specific latitude to employ the aircraft within defined operational bounds. The joint authorization letter enables VLAT aircraft to be used in fighting both DOI and USFS wildland fires.

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