



Breakup appears unlikely in crash

FIRE TANKER: "All of the aircraft structure was accounted for" at the wreck site, officials say.

11:22 PM PDT on Tuesday, April 26, 2005

By RICHARD BROOKS / The Press-Enterprise

The latest crash of a big fire bomber apparently did not involve an in-flight breakup, lessening the likelihood of structural failure that was blamed for three previous crashes and led to the grounding of three-quarters of the nation's large air tankers.

"All of the aircraft structure was accounted for at the wreckage site," National Transportation Safety Board investigators say in a preliminary report on the April 20 crash that killed three Lockheed P-3B Orion pilots near Chico in Northern California.

Readings recorded by engine instruments suggest that all four Allison turbo-prop motors were producing power when the converted Navy submarine hunter slammed into the ground at 202 mph during a training flight, says the report released Tuesday.

Killed were pilots Capt. Brian Bruns, Paul Cockrell and Tom Lynch, all employees of the plane's owner, Chico-based Aero Union Corp.

The preliminary findings mean there's no reason to permanently ground or even temporarily "stand down" the other P-3B Orions that account for seven of the 10 privately owned tankers scheduled to drop fire retardant this year under contract to the U.S. Forest Service, Forest Service officials said.

"We don't have any indication they are unsafe," Forest Service spokeswoman Rose Davis said by phone from Boise, Idaho. "The early indications from NTSB (suggest) ... they didn't find any signs of a structural problem."

It may take investigators a year to determine the probable cause of the accident.

Structural failures caused by metal fatigue resulted in the wings snapping off three tankers in mid-air during recent years, killing eight crew members, NTSB investigators have reported.

Concerns over the safety of the fleet prompted forestry officials to cancel the contracts for all 33 big tankers a year ago.

This year, contracts have been issued to Aero Union for seven P-3 Orions and to three other firms for two Lockheed P-2V Neptunes and a Douglas DC-7.

The remaining 23 tankers haven't passed a complete safety screening, which is designed partly to determine how many more hours they can fly without risking structural failure.

The likelihood of a reduced federal tanker fleet this fire season puts an added burden on the California Department of Forestry's fleet of 23 medium-size Grumman S-2T Trackers.

A Tracker hauls 1,200 gallons of fire retardant, compared to the 2,000- to 3,000-gallon loads carried by the large tankers in the federal fleet.



1996 / The Press-Enterprise
Seven P3 Orion planes have been contracted by the U.S. Forest Service for fire duty this year.

However, budget cuts have raised the possibility that each of the Trackers may have to be grounded one day a week this year, CDF officials have said.

Asked about the situation during a Monday press conference, Gov. Schwarzenegger replied, "We will have the full fleet." He did not elaborate.



AP photo

The governor's office referred questions about the state tankers to Deputy Director H.D. Palmer, of the California Department of Finance. Palmer confirmed that the governor said only, "We will have the full fleet" but insisted the meaning is clear.

"Keeping a plane on the ground during fire season as a response (to budget cuts) isn't going to happen," Palmer said. "The governor made it clear in no uncertain terms that that's not going to happen."

But the CDF official responsible for firefighting and aviation said it remains a question of money. The department faces a \$6.7 million cut.

"His statement is correct: We do have our full fleet of aircraft and (fire) engines," CDF Deputy Chief Jim Wright said of the

governor's press conference statement. "The question is: Will we be able to staff them on a daily basis?"

Schwarzenegger also was asked if he would like to "take a look" at jumbo-jet size Russian aircraft that have been touted as a possible replacement for the grounded federal tankers. He replied, "I look at everything, any kind of a good idea that we have, yes."

On Tuesday, government and industry observers offered differing views of the politics and practicalities of a state tanker cutback and the proposed use of the Russian jet.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Huntington Beach, announced he would make a five-minute speech late Tuesday on the C-Span cable television channel to advocate the use of the Ilyushin Il-76 jets that can carry 11,000 gallons of water.

"The Russian jets have four times the capacity of the biggest U.S. air tankers and would provide much-needed assistance to California's fire departments," Rohrabacher said in a written statement.

But an industry spokesman discounted the notion.

"The feds and the state have looked at that thing before," said William Broadwell, executive director of the Aerial Firefighting Industry Association. "They're expensive. They're not new technology.

"Frankly, they're just not worth it. They just drop water (instead of fire retardant). I don't see CDF having anything to do with them. They (CDF officials) don't have enough money to run their S-2s ... (so) they certainly wouldn't have enough money to contract with the Russians."

Wright said that if the governor tells CDF officials to consider it, they will.

"But try to envision a large jet aircraft maneuvering into some of these canyon areas that our aircraft work in," he said. "That size aircraft is not something we would use in our day-to-day missions.

"It might potentially be used by us on a larger fire situation. But that's not to say we need to run right out ... and acquire it."

Reach Richard Brooks at (909) 806-3057 or rbrooks@pe.com

Online at: _____