



## news

# Fired up

Did the Forest Service fail to do its job?

by **Rob Campbell**

Now that we've lost 750,000 acres, 23 lives and almost 3,000 homes to the current string of wildfires in Southern California, it's less than comforting to be told that better firefighting equipment could have been brought in to ameliorate the disaster, but that's exactly what U.S. Representatives Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and Curt Weldon (R-PA) contend.

In a Washington, D.C. press conference on October 30, Rohrabacher and Weldon led a cadre of other officials in decrying the US Forest Service's refusal to consider the Russian government's Ilyushin-76 (IL-76), an air-tanker that carries 11,000 gallons of water (more than three times the capacity of the Hercules C-130, our largest domestic water-drop craft) as part of their fire suppression arsenal. Rohrabacher, who passionately held the floor and called for an immediate end to the "bureaucratic logjam" that was keeping this life- and land-saving technology from our reach, called the conference when the USFS ignored his demand for a meeting and a prompt, stateside demonstration of the IL-76's capabilities.

The IL-76 can drop a near-solid sheet of water on an area the size of 12 football fields in 10 seconds, and because it uses a gravitational, rather than a pressurized, release system, which creates a simulated downpour rather than an aerosol mist, much more of the water released from its holds actually makes it to the ground. Since 1995, the Russians have repeatedly offered a pair of manned, tanked and waiting IL-76s during major U.S. fire outbreaks—asking only for primary expenses to be covered—but the US Forest Service, the body in charge of all wildfire control on federal land, has told them time and again that their services were neither needed nor wanted. Now, they no longer keep the immense aircrafts waiting in the wings, and are waiting for someone from the US government to step forward and ask them over.

That is unlikely to happen, as the Forest Service continues to assure anyone who challenges their decision to keep the IL-76 out of American firefighting missions that the plane is too big, too fast, drops too much water and can't operate under current regulations that require an air-tanker to fly downhill as it releases its hold (the IL-76 must release its sheet of water at a parallel position to the land for maximum effect).

Like Rohrabacher, the Reporter received no reply from the Forest Service regarding questions about their resistance to the IL-76.

This doesn't surprise Tom Robinson, a fire administrator and instructor of fire prevention with the Virginia Offices of Fire Programs and Emergency Services in Richmond, VA who admits to being a "crusader" and "zealot" on the subject of the IL-76. In 1996, he joined Global Emergency Response (waterbomber.com), a Canadian-Russian-American joint venture created to co-sponsor the IL-76 in disaster mitigation around the world. The venture looked hopeful at first, with a positive response from a USFS specialist after a demonstration in England. But the response was squelched on this side of the Atlantic, and since then, the USFS has stymied all attempts to bring the IL-76 to the States, even for a further demonstration.

This could well be viewed as criminal, according to Robinson, who says that most of the homes and many of the lives lost in the last several major US fires could have been saved had the Russian tanker been deployed. "I'd risk my reputation on it," he says; a reputation that includes Marine service and a plethora of official honors for his work in fire prevention and suppression, including President Bush Sr.'s 1000 Points of Light award and a National Heroism award from the Secretary of HUD. "The plane does not fit into the Forest Service's method of operation," he says, "and if they can't control it, they don't want anyone else to." Robinson, a staunch patriot by all accounts, accuses the Forest Service of a misplaced protectionism and overblown national pride. "They just don't want to relinquish control," he says, "but someone with good sense is going to take firefighting away from the Forest Service."

Robinson also says that the US Forest Service continually misrepresents the Wildfire Suppression Assistance Act of 1989, saying that it disallows foreign assets to be drawn into a firefighting scenario until all private contractor assets are completely exhausted. What the Act actually states is that foreign assets may be called in when domestic assets are no longer capable or readily available to handle the situation at hand. Contrary to the various reports of on-scene fire control experts and crew commanders, the USFS officially maintains that this type of capability downfall has never occurred.

"Please don't think we're picking on the firefighters," says Robinson, having been one himself for many years, with a handful of successful international missions on the IL-76 under his belt. "They are doing everything they can with what they've got." But what they've got, he says, is insufficient, and the USFS knows it.

Rohrabacher, Weldon and Robinson are hardly alone in their crusade. Last week, Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) wrote President Bush a letter requesting that he go over the Forest Service's head to request an IL-76 demonstration, but the administration has yet to reply. Perhaps if the planes were deployed now, at the tail-end of such horrendous devastation, the public would raise such an outcry over recent, needless losses that no one would truly benefit, but at this point, Robinson is not willing to settle for mere capitulation.

"I want vindication," says Robinson. He also states that some lower-level USFS personnel have come forward to say that they know the planes should be allowed in, but are loath to speak out for fear of losing their jobs. "My goal is to stand before the California Legislature and address the Forest Service in a open forum," says Robinson. "Forest Service personnel should be held criminally liable for what they have done."