

Common Misconceptions held by US Government Department Officials in Respect of the Ilyushin 76 "Waterbomber"

In the wake of a groundbreaking article on the MSNBC website, written by Michael Moran and published August 9 2000, entitled "Too proud to accept Russia's help", the National Interagency Fire Centre at Boise, Idaho, a department within the Bureau of Land Management, has been inundated with mail and calls from concerned citizens as to why this rather unique aircraft has not yet been deployed to help in the fight against forest fires across 12 western states. One such concerned citizen, a non-benefiting friend of the project of Global Emergency Response received the following reply from Janelle Smith:

"An article that appeared in an MSNBC web site on August 9 about the wildland fire agencies not using a Russian-built air tanker has spurred a flood of response from concerned citizens. First, this aircraft is owned by a private company called Global Emergency Response, a Canadian-Russian-American joint venture, private company; this aircraft is not the property of the Russian government. All airtankers used by the wildland fire agencies must meet safety and operational requirements before they are allowed to participate in suppression efforts. The National Interagency Airtanker Board is responsible for reviewing new aircraft and ensuring it meets these requirements. Global Emergency Response was given this opportunity in 1994, but has not yet requested this approval. In addition, fire managers reviewed the specifications for operation of the IL-76 and determined that it simply does not meet our needs. The IL-76 has not been approved by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the governing body of aviation for the United States. The wildland agencies, by law, must comply to FAA standards and requirements. Due to the size and weight of the jet, it can only be accommodated at a handful of the 50 airtanker bases in the country. It requires additional ground crews to manage its operation; people that are simply not available. This aircraft is not equipped to drop retardant, but is limited to water or foam. Retardant has proven to be more effective than water because, among other qualities, it does not evaporate as quickly. A Forest Service representative was quoted in an ABC News article and explained further the reasons the wildland agencies can not use this aircraft. The Ilyushin-76 also flies too high and too fast. It requires a long runway, demands extra ground crew, and lacks the precision of a helicopter or smaller plane. And it is designed to drop foam-treated water, not the longer-term retardant the Forest Service usually uses."

In fact, several inaccuracies here should be corrected. Global Emergency Response owns no aircraft whatsoever. The five Ilyushin 76TD that have been retrofitted as Waterbombers, are owned solely by EMERCOM, the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations, one of the top five ministries of the Russian government. As a result of the ownership of these aircraft, Federal Aviation Administration approval is not required, providing the use of the aircraft is on a government-to-government basis.

The plane however does meet FAA standards for certification. Indeed the MSNBC article shows a photograph of the aircraft landing on US soil, which would have been

impossible if FAA standards were not met. It has to be remembered that the Ilyushin 76 cargo plane flies the world on a daily basis, as do other aircraft that do not have specific US FAA certification. The e-mail omits to point out that many contractor aircraft do not have full FAA approval but rather fly under "x" or experimental quasi-certification, as they are not classified as passenger aircraft. Such contractor aircraft will have undergone considerable modification over their probable 50-year lifespan and will bear little resemblance to original manufacturer specification.

Such government-to-government bases already exist between US and Russia and are further facilitated by NATO under the Partnership for Peace Programme. Further in April 1997 the Russian Federation launched a proposal for 'Enhanced Practical Cooperation in the Field on International Disaster Relief'. The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council established the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre in June 1998, part of the original Russian proposal. All of these further facilitate the opportunity for US government departments to invite EMERCOM to assist in the extinguishing of forest fires currently blazing in US.

It should be stressed that should the EMERCOM Ilyushin 76 Waterbombers be deployed in US during the year 2000 fire season, it would be under such bases. Global Emergency Response whilst lobbying strongly for the use of this aircraft will not under any circumstance financially benefit from the arrangement. However Global Emergency Response would have a platform from which they can mount an application to the National Interagency Airtanker Board for approval in subsequent seasons. No volume based fire fighting aircraft are currently in use by the USFS and as such it would appear that a change in rules might be needed before the Il-76 would be acceptable to USFS. As such, Global Emergency Response would see these rules as discriminatory.

Certainly Global Emergency Response has not taken up the option to apply for Airtanker Board approval during the last 6 years of opportunity. This is perhaps understandable when USFS spokesperson, Ed Stone, has stated "We don't care how good the Il-76 is, we have no intention of using it". However, with the fact that these aircraft are government owned, it has continually been seen during this time that an initial government-to-government invitation would allow the aircraft to prove its worth more fully. The USFS has thus far made no attempt to study the Il-76. Where demonstrations have occurred in Australia, Greece, Russia and United Kingdom, the USFS has only sent low ranking officials to attend and represent, if any.

There is a basic conflict of modes of operation between the Ilyushin 76 and all other United States Forest Service contracted aircraft. Larger payload contractor aircraft use an aerosol method of despatch of retardants, whilst the Il-76 uses a gravity release method. The technology of release is 1950's in the case of the contractor aircraft, whilst appearing more primitive, is 1990's for the Il-76. The comparison here is between spitting and pouring. Contractor aircraft release retardants on a descending gradient, necessarily the Il-76 releases retardants on a marginally ascending gradient.

It should be stated here that EMERCOM do not use retardant chemicals in fighting forest fires in Russia. Needless to say one reason for this is the cost of retardant chemicals, secondly with the effectiveness of the gravity release system, chemicals become less of an issue. The Il-76 when used in Russia despatches water only. EMERCOM maintain that water is the most environmentally friendly suppressant. More effective and environmentally friendly, US manufactured retardants such as Pyrocool and Barricade Gel are systematically rejected by USFS for use in forest fire suppression. However the Il-76 is capable of dropping any liquid including the current USFS approved retardants, one of which has current certification for use with the Il-76.

The Il-76 is a jet aircraft, unlike all other USFS contractor aircraft. The natural assumption is of course that this plane is faster, and between fire and airport, it certainly is. In drop mode, however, the Il-76 travels at exactly the same speed albeit at a slightly greater height than all USFS contracted aircraft. The height is 60 - 90 metres above ground and the drop speed 280kph (151knots). These departures from USFS preferred drop height increase safety. Certainly with the capacity of the Il-76 it is able to lay a maximum payload of 11,000 gallons over an area of 1.2 kilometres by 80 metres. This surpasses all USFS contracted aircraft by a considerable margin. Accuracy of lower payloads would of course be paramount, but is of much less significance for the Il-76.

Relatively speaking, given its size, the Il-76 is a short-take-off-land aircraft. It was designed for heavy-lift under battlefield conditions and as such can take off and land on unimproved grass strips. The recommendation is a 6000-foot runway, but this length is only absolute when the aircraft is fully laden with fuel and payload (11,000 gallons of liquid would be substantially less than maximum payload). The majority of US airports including USFS bases conform here. There is a recommendation by Global Emergency Response for the plane to be accommodated at military bases where more suitable facilities are available for refuelling, tank filling, maintenance and crew accommodation. The aircraft is fully equipped with all personnel including its own ground support and would not seek nor require support form USFS personnel.

It is yet to be established as to whether this e-mail of Janelle Smith reflects fully US Government opinion and policy in respect of EMERCOM and the Ilyushin 76TD Waterbomber.

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