

Legislative Priorities for the Aerial Firefighting Industry

Summary

The aerial firefighting industry is crucial in protecting lives, property, and natural resources from the growing threat of wildfires. Following the recommendations of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, we urge Congress to prioritize legislation that will strengthen and enhance our nation's wildfire management capabilities. The United Aerial Firefighters Association (UAFA) presents the following key priorities for legislative action:

1. Stable, Predictable, and Sufficient Federal Funding
2. More Effective Acquisitions
3. Safety Enhancement and Efficiency
4. Pilot Training and Workforce Development
5. Data Sharing and Technology Adoption

1. Stable, Predictable, and Sufficient Federal Funding

Current Challenges:

- Annual appropriation process causes delays and uncertainty
- Hinders long-term planning and operational readiness
- Funding doesn't reflect increased wildfire costs to protect lives and property

Recommendations:

- Implement an increased agency funding formula based on:
 - Historical wildfire activity and future wildfire projections
 - Inflation and risk adjustments
- Ensure timely appropriations and effective apportionments to award contracts

Expected Outcomes:

- Highly skilled personnel retention
- Essential equipment upgrades
- Technological expansion
- Economic benefits for rural communities
- Lower industry pricing

2. More Effective Acquisitions

Current Challenges:

- Excessive regulations deter industry participation
- Duplicative or conflicting requirements with commercial practices
- Prescriptive language inhibits innovation and efficiency

Recommendations:

- Streamline acquisition requirements and processes to:
- Enable multi-year contracts
- Minimize lowest price technically acceptable award decisions
- Reduce agency-specific requirements that conflict with regulations or commercial standards
- Establish central points of contact within agencies
- Develop assistance programs for small businesses
- Expedite contracting processes for emergency wildfire response

Expected Outcomes:

- Lower industry pricing
- Innovation
- New businesses providing supplies and services
- Lower suppression costs due to faster response

3. Safety Enhancement and Efficiency

Current Challenges:

- Duplication of effort between FAA, USFS and DOI
- Underutilization of private sector expertise

Recommendations:

- Direct GAO to examine maintenance oversight of aerial firefighting fleet
- Establish a formal advisory committee of industry experts
- Explore feasibility of a third-party certification program
- Resolve inconsistencies in public aircraft operation regulations

Expected Outcomes:

- Agencies' return to mission focus
- Lower industry pricing
- Innovation
- New businesses providing supplies and services

4. Pilot Training and Workforce Development

Current Challenges:

- Shortage of qualified pilots in the aerial firefighting industry
- High training costs and lengthy agency qualification process
- Competition with commercial airlines for experienced pilots
- Lack of clear career pathways for aspiring aerial firefighting pilots

Recommendations:

- Fund pilot training programs (scholarships, loan forgiveness)
- Provide tax incentives for companies investing in training
- Support industry's ability to attract and retain pilots through consistent contract awards
- Adopt standard pilot requirements across agencies

Expected Outcomes:

- Rural jobs
- Lower industry pricing
- Innovation
- New businesses providing supplies and services

5. Data Sharing and Technology Adoption

Current Challenges:

- Lack of standardized data sharing protocols across agencies and industry
- Slow adoption of new technologies due to agency culture, regulatory hurdles and funding constraints
- Limited real-time data integration in operational decision-making
- Inconsistent access to critical information during firefighting operations

Recommendations:

- Increase collaboration for real-time wildfire data sharing
- Allocate funding for technology integration in existing operational procedures
- Promote pilot programs to reduce risk and improve adoption by agency staff

Expected Outcomes:

- Advanced detection and response
- Larger sphere of surveillance
- Innovation
- New businesses providing supplies and services

The UAFA is committed to working with Congress to implement these priorities, ensuring a stronger, more responsive aerial firefighting industry. This will significantly enhance our nation's ability to manage wildfires effectively, safeguard our communities, and reduce the health and economic impacts of wildfires.