

Bomber contract runs out of time

ERIC PLUMMER ALBERNI VALLEY TIMES

The time for the province to use the Hawaii Mars bomber this summer has run out with the expiration of a 30-day contract Tuesday.

The provincial government has not renewed the agreement with Coulson Flying Tankers, the water bomber's owner, to use the Second World War-era plane, despite the aircraft's deployment to several forest fires this month.

The fire suppression agreement began July 11 after a nearby blaze on Dog Mountain had quickly grown to 450 hectares by Sproat Lake, and was interrupted for 10 days at the end of July due to a prior commitment Coulson Flying Tankers had made to train ex-military pilots from China for using similar aircraft in the Asian country.

In a statement posted on a Coulson Flying Tankers' Facebook page on Tuesday the company's CEO Wayne Coulson said that deployments this summer proved the Mars bomber is still a valuable firefighting tool. Recent missions include attacking lightning-caused wildfires around Great Central Lake on Aug. 4 and a mission to a blaze near Harrison Lake on the previous weekend, where the bomber dropped 108,000 litres of water in one hour.



The Hawaii Mars water bomber takes a test flight over Port Alberni Tuesday, the day a one-month firefighting contract with the provincial government expired. The province has not announced any plans to extend the agreement.

(ERIC PLUMMER, TIMES)

"This is not an outdated or unreliable aircraft," stated Coulson on the Facebook page. "It has flown 70 flight hours in 40 days - between both the provincial and Chinese government contracts."

Despite the bomber's use over the last month messages from B.C.'s Ministry of Forests, Lands

and Natural Resource operations indicates a different opinion of the iconic air tanker. A provincial release from July stated that while the Mars bomber can scoop from 113 bodies of water in B.C., smaller Fire Boss planes currently being used can access from 1,700 lakes and rivers.

"The ability to reposition the Martin Mars is restricted due to its limited airspeed, its need to land on larger bodies of water, its inability to land at airports and refuelling requirements when working away from its primary base."

While no plans have been

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announced from the provincial government to continue using the Mars bomber this summer, Coulson has offered the massive air tanker to Washington State, where forest fires have grown within kilometres of B.C.'s border.

"I have been in contact with the incident command team members in Washington State offering the Mars up as a resource, however the aircraft in [the] state have been grounded due to smoke over the last couple of days," he said.

"We will remain in contact with them."

Eric.Plummer@avtimes.net

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