



The Australian Helicopter Industry Association & The Aerial Application Association of Australia Firefighting Policy 2019

Introduction

Australia has a significant and powerful aerial firefighting fleet available to protect Australian communities and environment.

The fleet, built on private ownership and operated by highly experienced Australian crews, is highly cost effective and very efficient in meeting bushfire and related threats as well as ensuring ground crews and volunteers are protected and have a serious capability at their disposal.

To further enhance this capability, AAAA and AHIA have joined together to propose a new way forward for governments that seeks to build on the strong record of service of the aerial firefighting sector rather than undermining it by supporting international companies that have no ongoing commitment to the Australian community.

While, from time to time in a highly mobile industry, it may be necessary to utilise international expertise and equipment, this should only ever be on the basis that the capability is not available in Australia.

All Australian governments should join in backing the Australian aerial firefighting industry to develop additional capacity to service the needs of our firefighting agencies and the communities they serve.

Strategic

- Commonwealth and States should review the current AFAC / NAFC and State / Territory arrangements to best deliver improved aerial firefighting strategy, procurement and operations.

- The Commonwealth / States / Territories should work with Australian industry leaders - being the AAAA and AHIA - to develop a national strategy to ensure supply of appropriate aircraft by Australian industry in a partnership approach. The national strategy must include a plan for the ongoing improvement of the quality and capability of the fleet and a strong role for Australian suppliers.
- An independent, research-driven approach should be used to determine the optimal mix of aircraft types – including fixed wing and rotary wing, Single Engine Air Tankers, light (air attack supervision only), medium and heavy helicopters, LATs and VLATS and drones – to be incorporated into the national aerial firefighting fleet. Consideration should also be given to issues such as reliability, redundancy, flexibility and cost-effectiveness that may arise from multiple rather than single or very limited number assets.
- However, industry believes that given Australia’s differing climate, fire type, fuel loads and topography, government should ensure it has a range of assets available in the aerial firefighting toolbox to match to the specific conditions, threats and firefighting response likely to be most effective.
- As a core commitment to the development and implementation of a national strategy in support of aerial firefighting, governments should enhance their ‘partnership’ commitment to industry by establishing and sustaining stronger consultative and decision sharing mechanisms and formalised bodies for both national and State/Territory jurisdictions. This should include a National Aerial Fire-Fighting Consultative Committee that includes both AHIA and AAAA as key members.
- In addition to fulfilling a consultative role, the National Aerial Fire-Fighting Consultative Committee should also be tasked with developing:
 - a nationally consistent aerial firefighting procurement, contracting and management strategy for all aerial firefighting assets
 - a national aerial firefighting research program
 - a national aerial firefighting quality assurance program
 - a national aerial firefighting Safety Management System

Procurement

- The industry is strongly of the view that taxpayers are ill-served by government ownership of aerial firefighting assets due to considerations of capital cost, utilisation and out-of-fire season downtime, competition impacts, and lack of expertise issues. Government and taxpayers very much benefit from a partnership approach with industry.
- Ownership of assets should be through government / private partnerships, whereby assets and services are contracted for longer periods of at least five years to give companies the confidence and financial security to invest in long term asset development.
- Government should implement a ‘buy Australian first’ policy for all fire agencies to support Australian industry and jobs.

- The Commonwealth and States/Territories should significantly increase the national annual budget available for aerial firefighting activities.
- All States / Territories should increase the number of full-availability contracts.
- All States / Territories should increase the length of contracts to better match the longer fire seasons now being experienced.
- Industry strongly supports the use of genuine local operators on local fires when all contracted aircraft have already been deployed (eg for Call When Needed availability) – being local operators who have a fixed base in the local area and who provide ongoing employment and services for the local area.
- Industry is strongly opposed to the ‘tow trucking’ practices that appear to be encouraged by NAFC/ARENA and some State agencies. This includes the speculative practice of repositioning aircraft to take advantage of possible fire activity through the Call When Needed system in some jurisdictions.
- Industry strongly supports the establishment of a national aerial fire-fighting quality assurance and continuous improvement system that will enable feedback to operators, pilots and agencies of in-field performance data that can be used to improve practices, inform procurement and potentially identify areas of future research.

Operational

- The concept of aggressive initial attack and utilising fire-fighting aircraft in this role is central to a strategic approach to fire fighting.
- Industry strongly supports the establishment of a national Safety Management System for aerial fire-fighting in accordance with well-established practice in aviation including the adoption of the principles of a safety culture within all fire agencies and ensuring that only aviation qualified personnel are put in positions of control over aviation assets. Such a system should seek to ensure that procurement and contracting requirements – for example the requirement for installing and managing up to five radios and a mobile phone in the cockpit – do not cut across aviation safety principles and potentially compromise the safety of pilots and crews.
- Industry strongly supports the improvement of a training pathway for Australian pilots to qualify for firefighting duties through a stronger focus on industry-provided training. In particular, the removal from NAFC contracts of the ‘50 hours experience on firebombing operations before being allowed on fire operations’ requirement and its replacement with a coherent and agreed methodology for training and approval of pilots is essential. The ‘50 hour experience’ requirement in contracts undermines superior alternative training systems and is readily abandoned by NAFC upon request – except at lower levels of the organisation. The removal of this requirement in contracts or the modification of it should be a matter for immediate address - using the current CASA training exemptions as a basis for an improved training system.

- Industry strongly supports the mandatory and immediate reporting of all drone incursions within or near the fireground to both ATSB and CASA, and that NAFC should strongly encourage CASA to enforce rules and mount prosecutions. In particular, industry encourages NAFC to work with State police agencies and CASA to secure equipment that will enable the identification of drone operators in real time on a fire ground.
- All contracted aircraft should be enabled to self-launch within established parameters to rapidly attack fires.
- Contracted aircraft should be appropriately supported by suitable ground equipment positioned at key strategic locations across the States and Territories and the identification and, where necessary, construction of suitable landing areas for aerial fire-fighting operations. Consideration should be given to working with industry on contracting ground support assets as well as aviation assets to improve efficiency and safety of aircraft replenishment tasks.
- ARENA (the existing national aircraft selection and tasking system) information must be improved to reflect the particular aircraft capabilities when considering tasking. This information is already provided as part of the contracting information but is not considered when tasking same/similar aircraft types that may have different capabilities due to different engines, fit out or equipment.

Further information

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