

Pilot Peter Jones with the Airtractor 802 Fire Boss at Mudgee airport. Picture: Britta Campion

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## Single engine amphibious Fire Boss broadens fire-fighting fleet



Pilot Peter Jones with the Airtractor 802 Fire Boss at Mudgee airport. Picture: Britta Campion

The nation's firefighting air fleet has been widened to include large fixed-wing air tankers with recent technological improvements making them far more viable for Australian conditions.

The National Aerial Firefighting Centre, which co-ordinates aviation firefighting response for all the states and territories, has also begun using single-engine amphibious float planes as it moves to broaden the flexibility of its fleet.

The NAFC has contracted two Air Tractor AT-802 Fire Boss planes that are fitted with floats — to allow the plane to land on, and scoop up, water — including one piloted last week by veteran aviator Peter Jones, who was fighting the central NSW Sir Ivan fire.

NAFC general manager Richard Alder said that over the past three seasons the government body had also contracted fixed-wing air tankers, including, on behalf of Victoria, a four-engine turboprop C-130 Hercules and an RJ85 four-engined jet — both fitted out specifically for fire bombing.

Over the past two seasons, on behalf of NSW, NAFC had also contracted a firebombing configured Lockheed L100 Hercules — the civilian version of the C-130 Hercules, a prolific military transport aircraft — and a DC10 three engined jet.

Mr Alder said new developments in “drop systems” — the mechanics for dropping water and fire retardant from the aircraft — meant such aircraft were now viable in Australian conditions. “We looked at the larger fixed wings in the past but found they didn't really suit the Australian situation,” Mr Alder said.

“But in the last three years there has been a whole new generation of drop systems come to market and we think there is a valid cost effective role for them.”

Australian bushfires, compared to those in say California, typically needed more “drop - litres” per square kilometre on account of typical fire intensity, which was increased by heat and the nature of Australian trees, particularly the gum tree.

Aside from far higher load capacities, a key advantage of fixed-wing air tankers was the high speeds they could travel, substantially reducing the time between airports and fires.

Fighting the Sir Ivan fire north of Mudgee in central NSW — which destroyed 23 homes and a church — Mr Jones said the AT-802 Fire Boss was in many cases far more effective than its helicopter rival, the Erickson S. 64-E Aircrane.

The Aircrane — or “Elvis” as it has become affectionately known — was far less effective in situations where a lot of ground needed to be covered, because it used far more fuel.

“If you do the maths (the Fire Boss) can be twice as effective, it can be up to six times as effective, it depends on how far you have to haul to the fire,” Mr Jones told *The Australian*.

The Fire Boss carries about 3000 litres of water, and about 400 litres of fire-retardant gel, which is mixed with the water on-board.

While the standard AT-802 had long been a workhorse in the nation’s firefighting arsenal, Mr Alder said NAFC had introduced two float-equipped versions — the Fire Boss — over the past two or three years to assist with varied requirements.

“Recently in the Tasmanian fires the Fire Boss on floats was a great contributor because of its scooping ability and rapid refuelling,” Mr Alder said. Regardless, NAFC would continue to contract the Erickson Aircrane, and had six in Australia this season, the same number it had contracted in each of the past three years.

A pilot for more than three decades, Mr Jones holds a highly specialised endorsement to pilot the Fire Boss, and is just one of about six pilots in Australia with that endorsement.

In the US there were estimated to be about 20 pilots with such an endorsement.

The Elvis is so-called because one of the Erickson Aircranes which make an annual pilgrimage to Australia after the northern hemisphere fire season, spent a considerable time in Memphis, the birthplace of Elvis Presley.

“Don’t talk to me about Elvis,” Mr Jones jokes when *The Australian* asks about his rotary-winged rival.

*The Australian* suggests the Fire Boss needs its own popular moniker, such as Australian country music icon Slim Dusty.

Mr Jones smiled at the suggestion but remained largely indifferent to that choice.