



Firefighting aircraft plan expensive and ill-conceived

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The confusion and disorganization surrounding the future of the territorial firefighting aircraft fleet is yet another example of the lack of financial reality involved in GNWT decisions, ostensibly made on behalf of northern residents. Planning and foresight are nowhere in evidence as various government departments seem to careen from one half-baked idea to the next.

The most recent dubious decision was to prematurely award three firefighting aircraft contracts to Buffalo Airways as part of the GNWT's plan to give northern aviation companies a chance to take over services previously provided by southern-based Conair Aviation.

On the face of it, the idea seems noble enough. Spend money in the North, create jobs and foster the local economy. But a closer look reveals the GNWT is making some serious compromises in its efforts to promote northern business.

First, the decision to call for proposals was only made in December - after numerous delays over the involvement of Dene/Metis Holdings - leaving northern aviation companies far too little time to organize the equipment, personnel and expertise. No doubt the best thing would have been to extend Conair's contract by a year, giving northern aviation companies more time to prepare.

Instead, the GNWT decided to relax the contract standards to allow Buffalo Airways to use DC-4 aircraft - for a period of one year - in place of the DC-6s previously provided by Conair. In doing so, the GNWT has ignored advice that clearly states DC-4s are not up to the job. A comprehensive fire review completed by an independent consulting firm two years ago and costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, clearly states "the replacement of the DC-6 air tankers with DC-4 aircraft is not justified on cost or performance grounds."

The report points out two DC-4s would cost almost twice as much to lay a given line of fire retardant as a DC-6. In addition, the useful range of a DC-4 is less than half that of a DC-6. In the end "more than two DC-4s would be required to match the performance of one DC-6." The two DC-4s to be used by Buffalo Airways still have to be certified, a lengthy and expensive process which might well not be completed in time for the coming fire season.

Interestingly, the proposal put forward by Air Tindi would have included at least one DC-6, leased from Conair. But the ministers of Public Works and Services and Renewable Resources made the final decision to go with Buffalo Air, provided owner Joe McBryan meets various deadlines in coming months.

The idea of a relatively inexperienced company providing firefighting services with inferior aircraft has set off alarm bells among territorial fire authorities, who privately worry the DC-4s will not provide the services or safety levels they need. True, there are still the GNWT's four CL215 aircraft but they have less capacity than the DC-6s. There are also very real concerns over the threat of aerial accidents.

Financially, the decision to go with DC-4s makes no sense. The overall cost of operating the two DC-4s from Buffalo is about 70 percent more than operating a single DC-6 aircraft provided by Conair. Yet Conair actually provided one full-time DC-6 and another on standby.

In addition, the insurance costs Buffalo Airways will have to pay to insure the GNWT's four CL215s will be as much as \$1 million more than that paid by Conair with a proven track record.

To make up for the inadequacies of the DC-4s, additional aircraft will almost certainly have to be hired from the South, creating additional expenses. Conair is still walking in the wings, armed with this knowledge. But additional aircraft may not always be available. All it takes is a bad fire season elsewhere in the country and that premise could soon fall by the wayside. Communities already concerned last year over a perceived inability of the territorial fire service to protect property will not relish the prospect of even lower capability in the coming year.

In essence, the GNWT has decided, in its wisdom, to pay more money for a lower level of service. How much more is something the government has so far refused to publicize and, judging by past experience, is unlikely to do so in future. But it's hard to imagine the disarray and uncertainty surrounding the territorial firefighting fleet is doing much for northern business or northern safety. And it certainly isn't doing much for the territorial budget in a time of fiscal restraint.



