

Air tankers fill the skies

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ST. GEORGE - With fires burning all around Southern Utah, a number of air tankers have been brought in to assist with dousing the flames, but officials say the high air traffic can cause some concerns.

Mike LaPier, St. George City Airport manager, said the constant traffic in and out of the airport has not caused a strain on the staff. He said it simply comes down to the local pilots realizing they have to pay more attention when they are in the sky and the pilots arriving from out of state having to learn local practices.

"They have all blended in pretty well," he said. "There is obviously more traffic, but everyone seems to understand they have to work together."

LaPier said the main thing is for all of the pilots to take a little extra time to understand procedures in the airport and in the air. He said because St. George does not have an air traffic control tower, the pilots have to rely on their own instincts when in the air.

"I am not concerned," he said. "Even with all of the increased traffic, things are going pretty well."

This increased traffic is definitely a change for the airport staff from the rest of the year though. LaPier said during fire season there are takeoffs and landings constantly.

"In the span of a day, we can have 50 or 60 takeoffs and landings," he said. "That is a lot of activity, but our staff is handling it well."

With the upcoming holiday, the threat of danger in the skies and on land increases for fire crews, but LaPier said the air tanker pilots will be forced to rely on their own common sense.

"Everyone intuitively knows to stay away from the fireworks," he said. "This is a see and be seen operation."

As for helping the pilots, LaPier said it just comes down to getting through fire season.

"This is our busiest time of year in terms of takeoffs and landings," he said.

Mike Archer, technical adviser of Wildfire Research Network, said while the skies may seem crowded, there is actually an air tanker shortage across the nation right now.

"Typically we have four dozen heavy air tankers nationwide to assist with the fire season, but this year we only have one dozen for the whole nation to use," he said.

Archer said if there are more than a few fires burning across the United States, the pilots could be "stretched pretty thin."

"I am pretty worried," he said. "The whole Southwest is pretty much a cinder box right now."

Archer said there are bills currently in Congress that could assist with this crisis, but for now the fires are being fought by a lot of volunteer "mom and pop" type organizations.

"A lot of the planes are grounded because there have been some high profile crashes over the last few years," he said. "Because of this, more inspections are required and the pilots are forced to go out and cover the costs of these themselves."

Archer said local residents should contact their congressman and senators immediately to get the laws changed to help with the air tanker shortage.

"The squeaky wheel gets the grease," he said. "We all have to help because these planes are really important. They can get to a fire quickly even in rugged terrain."

Archer said air tankers are often able to "knock out" a fire before it ever becomes a major concern.

"These planes are really ideal," he said. "We just need to help get them all back into the air."

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