

A10 Warthog

After 100 years of disastrous excess fire suppression, poor logging practices, and climate change we're in this conundrum of needing much more fire in the forest and the need to prevent the huge high intensity fires that burn a lot of houses, leave no seeds over large areas, and are the major cause of glacial melt.

The snag that started the Whitewater fire smoldered for a week before it took off. You could see it from the highway, but because it was in a steep, heavily timbered canyon it was too dangerous to man with a ground crew. It finally blew up into a huge fire, including a lot of New Mexico's last old growth forest. A couple of A10 Warthogs, each carrying 1,200 gallons of water and slurry could have put it out with ease. We need a lot more fire in our forests, but when it's dry and windy, it's way better to put it out before it gets away, and the A10 is just the right tool for the job. We have lots of them and their usefulness for the military is rapidly declining.

A couple of A10s could fly up a steep canyon, drench a smoldering snag with a thousand gallons of water or slurry, turn around and slime it with a two ton ball of snot, then drench it again, and do it fast and cheap. Depending on conditions, three or four in formation could contain a few acres. A10s would be an important asset for protecting ground crews. A10s could be quite useful for structural protection at the urban interface. Because of their size, accuracy, speed, and economy, A10s would replace the ineffective little SEATs, and augment the slow and expensive helicopters. Because of their ability to fly in adverse conditions, they'd be good for spot fires ahead of the main fire. They could fly at night, the best time to fight a fire. They could come in behind the big air tankers and hit the hot spots. Because they have a long loiter time, A10s could double as lead planes for the conventional air tanker fleet and offer protection for ground crews. I'm guessing that they could scoop load. An A10 can land on just about any decent dirt road. There are a lot of things an A10 would be good for on the fireline. There are plenty of Hog pilots who'd love to be flying.

We've got a lot of A10s sitting around doing nothing. Let's put them to work while we still can. Replace the gun with enough ballast to maintain fore and aft balance. Replace the ammo can with a slurry tank and carry the water in pods on the under wing pylons. Drop chutes that deflect downward and intake air deflectors will avoid over-spray into the engines. There's still a limited need for A10s in the military, so keeping the wing factory up to date is justified.

I've been trying for years to get the Forest Service to see what an A10 could do, but it's like talking to a brick. In the early days of aerial firefighting, their attempts to put fires out with slurry were largely ineffective. Drop speed for an air tanker is about two acres a second. No matter how skilled the pilot, they mostly missed, and even when they got it right, slurry doesn't penetrate deep enough into the canopy to stop a fire. They have a mindset that you can't put a fire out from the air. The purpose of an air tanker is to drop it out of the crown and slow it down for the ground crews, and the bigger the better. Once a fire gets away that's fine, but it's a hell of a lot better to put it out before it gets away.

Many of us who work in the woods can clearly see that, like most entrenched bureaucracies, much of Forest Service upper management has long been afflicted with gross ignorance and many false assumptions. Because the Forest Service is part of the Department of Agriculture, the people controlling the purse strings may know a lot about Agrabiz, but they know very little about forestry. Today's forests are dying in a rapidly warming climate. Ecosystems planet-wide are moving uphill and towards the poles. We need major changes in forestry and firefighting tools and tactics if we're to save any of our remaining forests. One of the first changes is to leave the tree farms to the department of agriculture, but move oversight of our remaining forests to the interior department.