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Ag Aircraft Play Their Part in Firebombing

NSW's agricultural pilots and aircraft are making a great contribution in the current bushfire crisis - protecting ground crews, houses, property and the environment.

Specially adapted agricultural aircraft are used in the firebombing role across Australia and the pilots are all very experienced in low level operations.

Ag aircraft are working hand-in-hand with firefighters and controllers on the ground.

Executive Officer of the Aerial Agricultural Association, Mr Phil Hurst, says that aircraft are an important strategic tool in firefighting and their use can have a major effect on the progress of the fire.

"The community should be very proud of the job all our bushfire volunteers are doing, including the ag pilots who are flying in very difficult conditions - high winds, severe turbulence and poor visibility.

"Aircraft can be mobilised quickly and be moved from one part of the State to another (cruising at about 250km/h) to meet the challenge of the current extreme conditions. They are able to drop their load with pin point accuracy, using GPS equipment to guide them exactly to the designated drop zone.

"The knock down impact of the aircraft's load can be critical - putting the fire out altogether or giving ground crews breathing space to control a front or flank. Aircraft can carry up to three tonnes of water/retardant (approx. 3000 litres).

"Ag pilots and operators are committed to helping the bushfire effort and have invested heavily in leading edge equipment to ensure they can do the job," Mr Hurst said.

Agricultural pilots and aircraft have played a vital role in fire fighting in Australia for the last 50 years. The experience and training of ag pilots is invaluable in fire fighting, as is the manoeuvrability of the plane.

Dropping foam to suffocate the fire or retardant to prevent trees from burning, the ag aircraft will fly 10 to 20 metres above the fire, controlling the drop to suit the conditions and the terrain.

A sophisticated computer-controlled door can manage a 3000 litre drop in two to three seconds, split the load over different areas, or trail the load over five hundred metres.

Aircraft are particularly helpful with fires when a fast initial response can stop the fire's progress. Aircraft can also reach rough and remote terrain to control the fire.

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