

Jihad Dib

Minister for Emergency Services
Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
Minister for Youth Justice

Media Release

New contract for RFS aerial fleet building home-grown talent

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The NSW Government is providing certainty for the state's aerial bush firefighting capacity, with a new 10-year aviation contract signed by the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) that will boost local jobs and home-grown skills.

Coulson Aviation Australia, which has managed the majority of RFS aircraft for the past five years, has been awarded the contract to oversee the management, operation and maintenance of the entire RFS fleet for the next decade.

The fleet includes 11 aircraft – a 737 large air tanker, two Cessna Citations, six Bell-412 helicopters, a Chinook helicopter, and a Beechcraft Super King Air.

Under the new contract, the aircraft will be overseen by primarily Australian crews, in a shift that bolsters the local workforce and makes NSW more self-sufficient as bush fire seasons typically grow longer and more intense.

Global demand for trained air service crews is high as many travel between hemispheres to fight fires which are becoming more challenging to control.

Building local fleet and aviation teams will minimise the need for aviation support from the company's international personnel as the bush fire seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres increasingly overlap.

The new contract will also help develop the next generation of aviation personnel in NSW, with an expansion of the apprenticeship program attached to the RFS fleet. Providing training for local crews in advanced firefighting techniques will also ensure the community is better protected.

At least two mechanical apprentices will be part of an aviation team at any given time, providing an opportunity for them to learn from the industry's best and develop their skills handling firefighting aircraft.

During the 2022-23 bush fire season, RFS aircraft undertook more than 340 taskings and rescued 113 people. The RFS's 737 'Marie Bashir' was dispatched on 41 occasions to help battle 26 bush fires, dropping more than 600,000 litres of retardant.

The fleet is also used to support other emergency services, such as the NSW State Emergency Service for rescues during floods, when they are not being used for firefighting duties.

The new Chinook helicopter added to the NSW fleet last year will soon be able to hold its full capacity of 11,000 litres of water or retardant to fight fires this upcoming bush fire season, once the new water tanker is installed as part of the new contract announced today.

Minister for Emergency Services Jihad Dib said:

“The RFS is at the forefront of aerial firefighting innovation and response, with its fleet playing a pivotal role in firefighting efforts not just here in NSW, but right across Australia.”

“We are now looking to the future and working on making our local fleet and aviation teams even more self-sufficient, with fire seasons expected to become more challenging as the climate changes. Meanwhile, the RFS aviation teams will continue to support other emergency response efforts, such as flood rescue and reconnaissance.”

“It is important that we continue to grow the skills and experience of the local workforce, and the expansion of apprenticeships with the aviation crew will help build the next generation of firefighting aviation personnel.”

Commissioner of the RFS Rob Rogers said:

“The RFS aviation fleet has progressively grown in recent years to better respond and support firefighting and emergency operations across NSW, interstate and internationally.”

“In support of ground crews, aviation assets are a vital tool to help stop or slow a fire’s run and protect lives and property.

“The RFS has found a reliable and high-performing partner in Coulson Aviation, and we look forward to working with them as our aerial capability continues to expand.”

Coulson Group CEO Wayne Coulson said:

“We are extremely pleased to have been chosen as the sole aviation supplier to operate the NSW RFS-owned fleet of firefighting and emergency services aircraft.

“Coulson Aviation Australia has been the leading supplier of Large Air Tankers and Very Large Heli-Tankers to the Australian Government for the past decade and it’s an honour to have been selected again, to continue to run the world class RFS fleet.”

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