Missoula, MT…Neptune Aviation, the country’s biggest operator of large airtankers, reports that its fleet of ex-Navy P2V Neptunes remains wildfire mission-ready, following the discovery of a crack in the left wing of one of its tankers during a routine scheduled inspection in late January of this year. Although that one airtanker remains out of service pending an engineering evaluation, the remaining nine P2Vs were never grounded--thanks to quick action by the operator.

"We were the ones who discovered the problem and notified the FAA’s Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) in Helena, MT, and at the same time filed a Service Difficulty Report through the FAA’s electronic reporting system," said Dan Snyder, President of the Missoula-based company. "We then developed inspection criteria, which we took to the FAA’s Aircraft Certification Office (ACO) in Denver after we had inspected our entire fleet. The ACO asked us to provide the details of our inspection criteria, and then used that as the basis for the emergency airworthiness directive (AD), which was issued for all P2V operators in the US."

Snyder added that Neptune continues to work closely with the Helena FSDO, the Denver ACO, and the Seattle Transport Directorate by providing technical expertise and factual data at their request. "The resulting emergency AD includes much of this input as a basis for issuance."

Under the AD, all P2V Neptunes in the US were to be inspected within 24 hours of the directive's February 6, 2012, release date. The inspections specifically focused on the wing skin, spar, and web near the wing box--the structure which joins the wing to the fuselage. Since inspections of Neptune’s nine other airtankers did not indicate a similar problem, airtanker capacity for the coming fire season is essentially unchanged.

Snyder pointed out that Neptune's maintenance and inspection criteria are in full compliance with the approved Continuous Airworthiness Program (CAP), implemented by Neptune, and mandated by the US Forest Service (USFS) in 2004. "Neptune Aviation has always been at the forefront of dealing with the aging aircraft issues involved with the current
tanker fleet. The fact that we detected this problem before it led to a catastrophic failure indicates that the CAP is doing its job," he said.

In fact, Neptune Aviation is in the forefront of efforts to replace its Post-World War II tankers. Last year, it secured interim approval from the USFS for deployment of a modified BAE 146 jet, formerly in air carrier service, and is proposing that aircraft for the air tanker role. "We will be responding to the US Forest Service's Next Generation Tanker Solicitation by the February 15, 2012 deadline," Snyder reported. "Our intention is to add more aircraft to the US Forest Service airtanker fleet under this solicitation, while continuing to maintain our current P2V tanker fleet."

"The proactive maintenance action taken by Neptune Aviation to insure the integrity of its airtanker fleet, is another example of the capability of private enterprise to carry out and assure the availability of an invaluable asset in the fight to contain wildland fires during increasingly long and destructive fire seasons," said Tom Eversole, AHSAFA's Executive Director.

Neptune Aviation is a member of the American Helicopter Services and Aerial Firefighting Association (AHSAFA), the Washington-based trade association representing commercial operators of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft engaged in aerial wildland firefighting.

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