

Opinion Piece

The Essential Role of the Water-Bombing Helicopter

Beyond the paradox we highlighted in our previous opinion piece—specifically regarding the use of uncertified helicopters and foreign crews in the Drôme and Ariège departments, where likely political choices led to overlooking the capabilities offered by our domestic operators—the core issue runs deeper.

If the State persists in making inconsistent decisions regarding both short-term operations and long-term capacity building, it is primarily because choices are driven by public perception. The water-bombing helicopter (helitankers) is too often viewed merely as a supplementary tool compared to more high-profile assets. This is a mistake.

The Reality on the Ground: Combining Complementary Assets

It is time to restore operational reality: fighting modern wildfires can no longer rely on a single type of asset. Whether light or heavy, the water-bombing helicopter is an essential component in the combined use of all firefighting resources. Helicopters provide what is sorely lacking on the ground: surgical precision, operational flexibility, access to the most rugged terrain (especially mountainous areas), and ultra-close support for ground crews.

Helicopters can source water from locations positioned by humans—right in the heart of forests or even in urban areas. By typically drawing water from within 5 kilometres of the fire, an helitankers maintains a high tempo and an ultra-fast shuttle cycle.

Another stereotype clings to water-bombing helicopters: the myth of the "small machine." Certified heavy water-bombing helicopters used in Europe (such as the Airbus Super Puma family) boast massive payload capacities of 4 tonnes of water per drop. To combat fires effectively, ground teams can rely on complementary capabilities: the helicopter offers flexibility, the ability to adapt to complex environments, and precision, while the aircraft delivers the impact force of a high-speed drop (ranging from 6 tonnes of water for an amphibious aircraft to over 20 tonnes for heavy aircraft like the A400M).

Turning a blind eye to operational and institutional warnings

These observations are not limited to the helicopter community. They are shared by operational personnel—particularly within departmental fire and rescue services (SDIS in France)—as well as by the country's highest oversight bodies, whose official recommendations remain inexplicably ignored by policymakers in France.

As early as 2022, the Court of Auditors expressly recommended "evaluating the merits of new types of aircraft, including water-bombing helicopters." In 2025, the Senate Finance Committee drove the point home with Recommendation No. 4, demanding an "acceleration in the acquisition of heavy water-bombing helicopters."

More recently, parliamentary reports from both the National Assembly and the Senate have corroborated this assessment, explicitly advocating for a diversified air fleet to replace long-standing state assets that are pushed to their breaking point during every simultaneous crisis.

Official budgetary audits now highlight the financial and technical dead ends inherent in the "emergency-response" doctrine. The current model—relying on repeated seasonal leases of fleets from diverse sources—fails to provide operators with the long-term visibility needed for investment. Parliamentary rapporteurs explicitly note in their reviews of the Finance Bill that this model drives up public costs to levels that are increasingly difficult to justify given budget constraints. Attempting to mask a sign of weakness as fiscal prudence, the State has now opted to deploy [European RescEU assets](#), even though these rely on ex-military helicopters owned by foreign private companies. Public authorities argue that this represents a return on our financial contribution to the European Union, yet they overlook the three fundamental consequences we highlighted in our previous op-ed: the surrender of sovereignty, the difficulties imposed on national operators, and the undermining of safety regulations.

The water-bombing helicopter: a choice born of clear-sightedness

In the face of climate change and increasingly frequent wildfires, France can no longer rely on an aerial strategy rooted in the past. The water-bombing helicopter is neither a luxury nor a secondary technical option; it is the missing link—a precision tool that complements existing capabilities and is essential to tackling the threat of forest fires. A shift is urgently needed to ensure that our forests, our operators, and our industrial sovereignty are no longer sacrificed on the altar of reactive crisis management.

This transformation will require a sustained effort to inform, influence, and communicate at every level. It is imperative to educate, persuade, and raise awareness among both the general public and policymakers to overcome existing obstacles. Breaking down these barriers and finally integrating water-bombing helicopters into the national strategy on a long-term basis is no longer merely a matter of logistics; it is a choice born of clear-sightedness and an imperative for national and environmental safety.

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