

EDITORIAL

The forest burns, sovereignty evaporates: the stinging paradox of Black Hawk water-bombing helicopters deployed in the Drôme

As flames threaten several of our forest areas, the intervention of heavy water-bombing helicopters—built to foreign military specifications and chartered by the European Union from a Czech company—is bringing undeniable relief to the Drôme region.

It is a tactical success, certainly, but a strategic failure: that of a France unable to equip its own forces, preferring—unlike other nations—to pour public funds into uncertain, long-term industrial promises rather than investing in helicopters, expertise, and resources available on its own soil.

The images are striking and fuel deep bitterness within the French helicopter community. In the skies over the Drôme, two silhouettes characteristic of military combat zones are battling the flames. They are [American-made Black Hawk helicopters](#), owned by a foreign private company and deployed via the European solidarity mechanism, [RescUE](#).

In the face of an emergency, every ton of water dropped on our forests is a victory, demonstrating the essential role helicopters play in fighting these fires.

Nevertheless, seeing these aircraft fly under special waivers—ex-military, uncertified, US-made, owned by foreign operators, and flown by crews who do not speak our language (and thus constantly require a lead helicopter to avoid endangering ground crews)—symbolises decades of questionable state decisions and a major regulatory failure.

How did we get here?

Yet France is home to the world's leading manufacturer of civil and military helicopters. For their part, our private operators demonstrate—summer after summer—their technical expertise, operational flexibility, and exceptional ability to cooperate with other stakeholders in the fight against forest fires. Their pilots are trained, qualified, reliable, and committed. Yet, when it comes to finalising lease contracts, the State finds itself grappling with its own budgetary and policy contradictions.

The scandal runs even deeper. While French helicopters remain grounded for lack of funding, money is readily available when it comes to sinking public funds into the mirage of long-term technological promises. The State—which is already purchasing two Canadian aircraft that have yet to fly—is also subsidising domestic fixed-wing startups whose industrial future remains highly uncertain and speculative.

Projects aimed at diversifying the market for aerial firefighting aircraft exist only on the drawing board, navigating a fog of complex EASA certification processes and endless fundraising rounds. None of these projects offers a credible operational timeline before 2030. France is thus funding—at a loss—engineers' dreams for the distant future, while refusing to spend a few million euros to protect its forests today.

What message are we sending to our domestic manufacturers and operators by choosing to fund—via European subsidies—American military-origin aircraft that are barred from flying in our airspace under current regulations?

Our helicopter operators—so vital for rescue and firefighting missions—are being stifled by financial constraints and regulations that are extremely rigid, and at times completely out of touch with reality. Without the exemption granted to them so quickly, the foreign helicopters that flew over the Drôme region simply would not have been permitted to take off, barred by European and national certification and airworthiness regulations.

This unbalanced treatment defies common sense. The French helicopter community faces the worst of both worlds: on one hand, extreme regulatory strictness that penalises domestic companies; on the other, total reliance on foreign assets when a fire breaks out.

Yet, there is a pragmatic path that serves French and European economic interests.

The European industry is capable of producing heavy water-bombing helicopters—specifically the proven H215/H225 family platforms—certified by EASA, offering drop capacities comparable to Canadair aircraft and greater operational flexibility. Supporting the acquisition and leasing of new aircraft by French operators means investing in the national economy, preserving high-tech jobs, and ensuring seamless coordination over the radio—using a common language—for the safety of all.

The deployment of these Black Hawks in the Drôme region must serve as a wake-up call. Strategic autonomy must not be an empty phrase reserved for speeches or publicity stunts by subsidised start-ups; it must be put into action where the forests are actually burning. Public authorities must urgently provide breathing room for our helicopter operators by establishing a preference for national and European fleets in wildfire suppression—while still adhering to regulations designed primarily to ensure safety.

Failing this, every summer, it will not just be our forests going up in smoke beneath foreign rotors, but also our sovereignty, our economy, and our jobs.

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