



Nebraska has a new tool for fighting wildfires—a single engine air tanker, which arrived in Valentine last week.

The equipment, known as SEAT and under contract to the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, is available thanks to the Nebraska Legislature’s passage this year of the Wildfire Control Act.

That act also enabled creation of three SEAT bases at airports in Valentine, Alliance, Chadron and a mobile SEAT base that can be moved to an airport near any forest fire needing airdrops of fire retardant.

The SEAT bases will be managed by the Nebraska Forest Service.

The new air tanker will complement the existing aerial fire suppression program, which has been successfully used for many years. Aerial applicators will be the first choice for grass and rangeland fires, on which foam retardant is most effective.

SEATs are more effective in fighting forest fires, where their loads of heavy, slurry type retardant can penetrate tree canopies and help firefighters get control of flames.

The Legislature passed the Wildfire Control Act to beef up the state’s approach to wildfires in the wake of massive summer blazes last year that threatened property and strained local budgets. The effort to place more firefighting resources in remote corners of the state comes as forestry officials warn the state is likely to face more massive wildfires in the future.

State Forester Scott Josiah said he expects Nebraska to have larger and more intense “mega-fires,” citing heat, drought and climate change, as well as the spread of the highly flammable eastern red cedar tree.