BOEING PATENTS GIANT BULLET TO SHOOT DOWN BLAZES

News / Manufacturer



Boeing has come up with a new idea for fighting forest fires: shoot at them.

The aerospace company was awarded a patent this summer for what the application described as an “artillery shell comprising: an external surface; a cavity disposed within the external surface; a fire-retarding material disposed within the cavity; and a trigger configured to release the fire-retarding material.”

Basically, a giant fire-fighting bullet the size of a small dog, fired from a howitzer heavy artillery field gun.

“To retard forest fires, fire-retarding material is typically dropped into or in front of the advancing fire from aircraft such as helicopters or airplanes,” the application states. “Such aircraft deliver fire-retarding material at a low rate which often makes them inadequate.”

But the Boeing shell is designed to either detonate in front of a wildfire, spreading retardant materials on the ground to prevent the fire from progressing, or to detonate directly above it, dampening the flames.

Boeing designs and manufactures a wide range of rockets, satellites, and defense and security

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technology, as well as aircraft.

In 2010, a Russian company designed a firefighting bomb, to be dropped from an aircraft, which would disperse liquid over 1,000 sq meters when detonated, according to Wildfire Today.

Bill Gabbert, the editor-in-chief of Wildfire Today and a veteran wildfire fighter based in southern California, said there were “a number of reasons” why Boeing’s idea was not practicable.

“One, Boeing didn’t estimate the cost of these artillery shells,” he said. “If you’re shooting tens of thousands of them, the costs would be prohibitive.”

The main issue, he said, was that Boeing’s patent appeared to be based on a flawed premise – that releasing fire retardant directly on to a fire would put it out. “But retardant applied from the air does not put out fires,” he said. “In the best of circumstances, it can slow them down so that firefighters on the ground can get close and put them out.”

“Just that last fact invalidates the whole concept in my mind,” he added.

In an article in Wildfire Today, Gabbert called the firefighting shell a “lame-ass idea”, though he allowed that there could be a worthwhile application in the case of nuclear plant fires and emergencies with hazardous materials. “If a howitzer shell fired from miles away is the only way to deal with a nuclear meltdown, then that might be a feasible use for this idea.”

The patent stipulates that the outside surface of the shell would be made of “an environmentally safe material”, and that the projectile could be fired either in a “a concentration barrage, a creeping barrage, rolling barrage, or a block barrage”.

In a statement, Boeing said the company studies “many advanced concepts and evaluates many future designs in order to stay competitive in the marketplace”.

“The awarding of a patent does not necessarily mean that Boeing will be developing that concept or design in the near future.”

The western United States, reeling from the effects of a historic drought, is experiencing an unprecedented season for wildfires, with nearly double the five-year average of acreage affected in California, according to CalFire. In August, 80,000 people had to be evacuated near Los Angeles when the Blue Cut fire threatened their homes.

31 AUGUST 2016

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/manufacturer/boeing-patents-giant-bullet-to-shoot-down-blazes

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