

# SEAT Coordinator (SECO) Report – Southwest Area July 2008

## Assignment Description:

**SECO:** Al Alvarez

**Delegation:** SW Coord. Group

**Dates of Service:** June 29 – July 11, 2008

**Area of Coverage:** SW Area (Arizona/New Mexico)

**Purpose of Assignment:** Visit Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) bases in Arizona and New Mexico to ensure all Geographic Area SEAT Operations are being conducted in compliance with the Interagency SEAT Guide (ISOG) and other agency specific policy and guidance. I was also to work with appropriate aviation staff to immediately mitigate any significant aviation safety issues and make recommendations and assessments of the best airports to base SW SEAT operations. In order for me to address the purposes of my assignment, it was necessary for me to conduct interviews with SEAT Managers (SEMGs), pilots, drivers/loaders and dispatch centers.

### List of Sites/Persons Visited:

Deer Valley Airport/SEAT Base  
Kingman Airport/SEAT Base  
Las Cruces Airport/SEAT Base  
White River Airport/SEAT Base  
Williams Dispatch Center  
Tucson Dispatch Center  
SW Region Aviation Mgt.  
AZ BLM SAM  
State of AZ Aviation Specialist  
Albuquerque Air Tanker Base

Wickenburg Airport/SEAT Base  
Double Eagle Airport/SEAT Base  
Safford Airport/SEAT Base  
Show Low Airport/SEAT Base  
Arizona Dispatch Center  
SW Coordination Center  
BIA Inter-Region Aviation Specialist  
NM BLM SAM  
State of AZ SEAT Coordinator  
Libby Air Tanker Base

**Sites note visited:** The following sites were not visited due to time constraints or aircraft no longer located at bases:

Roswell Airport/SEAT Base  
Williams Air Tanker Base

Kanab Airport/SEAT Base

## General Findings:

### A. SEAT Operations and Management

The Single Engine Air Tanker program in the SE Area is in excellent condition. It has been 3 years since my last opportunity to review the geographic area as a SECO and prior to going on this assignment, I reviewed my previous SECO report and that of Bob Simpson's SECO report of 2006. I used these as base markers to determine improvements from past findings.

Past weaknesses such as lack of current SEMG Red Cards had greatly improved with only one SEMG not having a current card (the Ft Apache agency has been experiencing computer problems with the red card system). Morning briefings were taking place at all the bases and were excellent at those that I attended.

AARs and other debriefs are also taking place and are being documented! On several occasions, I was informed about the improvements recognized in the SEAT pilots during the last several years. ATGS's commented on how the pilots now have a much better grasp of target descriptions and are more accurate with their drops. Adherence to the fire traffic area standards has also improved. Dispatch centers remarked about the outstanding improvements in communication. . . I quote, "It is 100 times better than it was when we used them 2 years ago. They are sometimes better than some of the other aircraft."

Another area of marked improvement was in the use of the standardized "required" SEAT forms. With the exception of the SEAT Base Operating Plan (SEAT-Plan-001), dated 2008, all of the currently required and many of the non-required forms, were in use at the bases visited. Two bases, Double Eagle and the temporary base at Las Cruces had filled out the outdated SEAT Base Plan. The rest of the SEMGs had not filled them out and in a couple of cases, had never heard of the form. Another big improvement noticed by this SECO was that all the SEMGs had a current copy of the ISOG and they also were aware of the SEAT web site and how to find it. However, not all bases have computer access.

Historically, mobility of the SEATs in the SW Area has taken place, but was limited to a couple of agencies. On this assignment, I found that mobility has been on the increase – which is critical if the user is going to improve the SEATs effectiveness. Because of the increased mobilization that is taking place, more agencies are gaining knowledge and experience in the challenges that the SEAT resource presents to the users. Knowledge of logistical support, dispatch procedures, administrative responsibilities and numerous management details that is inherent to the SEATs have improved, but there still exists a need for understanding. Consequently, I personally believe that if the program is going to continue to grow as it has, to date, the importance of comprehensible standards and guidelines across the interagency arena, are imperative.

As identified in the 2006 SECO report, only the BIA bases are utilizing gels. The BIA bases at Show Low and Double Eagle have used Therma-gel with mixed reviews. The Double Eagle base's use of Therma-gel has received very positive reviews from the interagency fire community that they serve that the base is considering doing away with the use of retardant. Personally, I don't believe this is a good idea. Therma-gel is a suppressant, whereas LC95A is a retardant – each has a specific use – doing away with retardant, would reduce that base's flexibility to better serve the firefighter on the ground. The use of Therma-gel out of the White River/Show Low bases has received just the opposite reviews – folks on the ground have not been happy – though, the fire community there does not feel like the gel has been properly mixed and that the "hard water" in Show Low has a detrimental impact on the gel. Documentation on the use and results of the gels, good or bad, should be made available to the fire and aviation community.

As I previously mentioned, mobilization of SEATs to alternate bases is being accomplished. I believe that the reduction in the availability of large air tankers, coupled with reduction in fire funding and the reclassification of SEATs as a national resource has necessitated increased cross utilization of the resource. Also, as I mentioned in previous reports, the State of Arizona has led the way in the SW Area in mobilization of the SEATs. They have it down to a science. This SECO was involved and experienced, first-hand, the relocation of State and BLM SEATs from a tanker base to an airport and reduced turn-around times in half while supporting a Type II fire.

The State of Arizona has identified and regularly use approximately 14 airports around the state as SEAT reload bases. These bases are also used by other agencies. Currently, many of these are not covered by a SEAT Base Plan – at least, not using the current form nor is the information that some agencies may have on a base available for all users to take advantage of. New Mexico BLM and the State of New Mexico have undertaken the task of identifying airports in New Mexico that may prove to be effective SEAT bases. This SECO visited numerous N.M. airports 3-4 years ago and compiled SEAT Base feasibility reports for the following: Grants, Los Alamos, Las Vegas, Socorro, Truth or Consequences, Deming, Las Cruces and Lordsburg. This information should be on file at the BLM State Office in Santa Fe. I have discussed the use of the SEAT Base Plan with Mary Hayes of Safford BLM, Darren Mathis Az SAM and John Selkirk NM SAM and it was recommended to this SECO that all SEAT Base plans be made available to users via the SW Coordination Center's Aviation Web page. This effort represents a wonderful opportunity for the agencies from the adjoining states (AZ & NM) to work together for the benefit of the entire area.

To conclude this section, I would like to reiterate how pleased I was to find where the program is today in the SW Area. The professionalism shown by the pilots, support equipment and the operators along with the SEAT Managers has come a long ways in the last few years. In my opinion, much of the credit for this goes to the work and efforts of all those involved – from the national program lead to those that have helped implement the changes that have been required due to funding, contract changes and increased use and mobilization of the SEATs.

## **B. Issues and Suggestions/Recommendations**

**The increased use and sharing of the SEAT Resource has provided the fire managers with another effective initial attack weapon when used correctly. More users have realized that one of the best procedures available to improve the effectiveness of the SEAT, is to move it closer to the incident. Mobilization has proven to be very effective, but mobilization continues to spawn issues such as exceeding span-of-control; proper and adequate administrative and operational support; lack of clear understanding of the need for advanced planning to facilitate confusion-free mobilization and, an increased challenge to the interagency community to provide a well-defined, and standardized operational procedures and a framework within which all agencies and units can operate from.**

**The SEAT Program has an interagency steering and standards committee consisting of representatives from agencies that utilize SEAT and encourage users to recommend changes through respective aviation program managers. There is a protocol and form used for submissions found in the SEAT website. This SECO will submit “Request for Revision” forms for some of the issues described here.**

**The following is a brief listing of issues that this SECO experienced and/or became aware of during this assignment. The suggestions/recommendations are for the Southwest Coordinating Group’s consideration for further action:**

1. During a high-fire activity period during the last two weeks of June, there were two separate instances of SEAT Managers being overwhelmed by the number of SEATs at their bases. One instance occurred at the Roswell, NM tanker base; the other at Libby/Ft. Huachuca, AZ tanker base. Though the circumstances that led to the SEMG’s exceeding their span-of-control were different, the fact is that these two managers felt overwhelmed and asked for help. They are both well seasoned SEMG’s and recognized their situations and reacted properly without any apparent immediate safety issues, but they both felt overwhelmed. *These two incidents were briefly discussed with the national program lead and he requested a SAFECOM from each SEMG. The NM SEMG agreed through his SAM to submit a SAFECOM and the AZ SEMG submitted a narrative – attached to this SECO report.* After my discussion with the national office, I was informed that the three (3) SEAT span-of-control limitations do not apply to large tanker bases. This may be logical, but the exception is not addressed in the ISOG and the large tanker base managers –in the SW- are not aware of the exception either.

Suggestions: a). Clarification of the span-of-control exception at large tanker bases and inclusion of this clarification in the ISOG. b). Allow for flexibility of span-of-control exception by ensuring that the SEMG and TB Managers communicate and agree to current conditions (**in the Libby situation, the TBM had also asked for assistance; besides the 5 SEATs that were in rotation in the pit, there were 3 large air tankers also in rotation and due to lack of severity funding the tanker base was operating below proper manning levels**). c). Several SEMG’s suggested that the language previously found in the ISOG that allowed a SEMG to operate beyond the span-of-control (if he/she felt capable), “if an additional SEMG was in route”, should be reinstated. **Note: We need to ensure that SEMG’s are aware that if they are temporarily hosting a SEAT (one not assigned to them), they are not normally responsible to complete all of the required forms for that aircraft. Perhaps the ISOG should more clearly define this.** d). If mobilization continues to increase, perhaps now is a good time to consider, or reconsider – as I understand this has been suggested before – the need for the position of a SEAT Base Manager (SBAM) whose role and responsibilities would be similar to that of a Helibase Manager’s.

2. The Variable Term (VT) contracted SEATs at Kingman, AZ were mobilized to IA a fire in the St. George, Utah area. The SEATs made their first drop and landed at the St. George Airport/SEAT base to load and return. However, the St. George base did not have a SEAT there. Consequently, there was a lack of support vehicle/loader. The SEMG at St. George loaded the two aircraft after they had shut down. One of the pilots told this SECO, that the SEMG had apparently loaded before as he did an excellent job. The problem is that the St George base does not have a plan that allows the loading of SEATs by a local agency employee. **Note: A discussion with the National Office revealed that the loading of SEATs by agency employees is taking place in Montana, Colorado and Oregon. These bases have plans that allow for this activity to take place and those involved are required to complete a training syllabus.** Personally, I believe that allowing other than contractor personnel to load SEATs has the potential to improve the mobility of the resource. However, there needs to be a standardized, interagency recognized, approach to this activity, that currently appears to be all over the board and I am concerned about safety and liability issues.

Suggestions: a). SW Area Aviation Committee should assign a couple of people to review existing SEAT base plans that allow agency loaders and the training syllabuses used to train agency personnel to load . This information can then be used to decide whether the SW Area wants to adopt a specific standard for this procedure that in the SW Area. b). If a standard to allow the loading of SEATs by agency employees is accepted for the SW area the standard should be included in the SW SEAT Operating Plan. c). Language in Chapter 8 – SEAT Loading and Refueling, of the ISOG is vague to this SECO. It does not clearly define, nor allow for agency personnel to be trained and qualified as loaders and if this is to take place, I strongly urge that the ISOG plainly address this activity. d). A national interagency acceptance is necessary so that standards in loading procedures, hand signals communication requirements are addressed. e). If this activity is adopted, then the next logical step would be to document the bases where agency loaders are available so that users and dispatch center can use this information to plan their logistical needs.

**NOTE: While preparing for this assignment and reviewing the SW Area’s aviation web site, I noted that the SW Area’s Aviation Committee did not have an updated web site and the Interagency Southwest SEAT Operations Plan was last years. It appears to this SECO that the committee has been inactive. Considering the lack of funding that all the agencies are experiencing along with the rise in costs in the use of aviation resources, including the increase in the interagency use of these resources, the aviation committee should be one of the most active committees in the SW Area.**

3. Chapter 6 – SEAT Bases and Landing Areas addresses the importance of the ability of the SEATs to move and operate out of many different airports and for the user to recognize the operational limitations inherent in the SEATs. Part IV of Chapter 6 – SEAT Base Categories, identifies four different categories/capabilities of SEAT bases located at airports. Part V of Chapter 6 – Operations from Off Airport (remote) Areas, addresses operations that are not on an airport, but the ISOG does identify these remote areas as bases, but unlike the first four categories, these have special requirements.

Suggestion: A suggestion received by this SECO, one that I believe makes sense, is to categorize remote bases as Category V and continue to describe this type of base as it is currently describe in the ISOG.

4. Increased interagency mobilization, recent management changes of the SEATs from a local resource to a national resource and even more recent contract changes has precipitated some confusion concerning the responsibility and the administrative support that is compulsory of each SEAT’s contract. The most common remark, or concern, I hear from the field (and from other aviation personnel that are exposed to the administrative responsibilities of SEMG), is, “The amount of paper work that a SEMG has to do every day, is absurd.” Some even compared the SEAT program to the helicopter program and felt that the SEAT was easier to manage. . . I disagree.

Helicopters are managed by a helicopter manager and a crew. A manager usually goes with the helicopter. Management responsibilities for the helicopter can and normally are, delegated to members of the crew. Helicopter managers are normally PFT personnel and are able to attend program meetings, workshops, be members of committees and therefore can keep up with the changes that come up in their

programs. SEAT Managers are mostly seasonal or personnel that have regular agency jobs. Many are AD personnel. Since the SEMG position does not require adherence to arduous duty standards, this SECO has seen an increase of personnel taking the SEMG course in preparation for retirement – a good way to come back as an AD firefighter!

Suggestions: a). The amount of administrative and operational paperwork involved in managing a SEAT is arguably large, especially when one SEMG has 3 SEATs, but SEMG's need to keep in mind that of the six required forms, only four need to be filled out and kept up to date on a daily basis. However, it is imperative that these four forms be completed daily otherwise the lack of necessary information will create a ripple effect and increase workloads whenever the aircraft are moved. b). SEMGs need to be made aware that if they are temporarily hosting a SEAT (one that is not assigned to them), generally all that they are required to keep up to date is the Daily Operations Worksheet and Cost Summary Sheet and ensure that the SEMG that is assigned to that SEAT gets that information. c). The best time to complete these forms is to start them up first thing in the morning and complete them at the end of each day. d). The SEAT Base Operating Plan (SEAT-Plan-001) can be completed at the beginning of the contract or during the off season. **SEMG need to keep in mind that their main reason for existing is to ensure that we provide a quality product to the firefighter on the ground in a safe, effective and as efficiently as we can.**

5. The SE Zone (Tucson Dispatch Center), went from a four tier to a three tier fire dispatch system. This increased the aviation workload for the interagency dispatch center. In the past, dispatching SEAT and the management and logistical support they require was handled by the BLM and the State of Arizona. This change led to misunderstandings on the use of the SEATs. My discussion with personnel that have been involved in a change from four tier to three tier dispatch experienced misunderstandings and confusions also with normal span of 3 years before things smooth out.

Suggestion: Those that have been through a change in dispatch organization suggestion that the SE Zone, work closely together in round table, face-to-face discussions and ensure that their operational plan is also addressed and updated as needed.

6. During this assignment, I received input, either by innuendo or straight-out comments, that the SEAT program is strictly a BLM program – interagency in name only and not necessarily viewed that way. There appears to be little to no acceptance of input from the field; especially from outside BLM. However, even people from within BLM felt that the program needed to exhibit an increase in interagency participation. I did mention that there is an interagency steering and standards committee consisting of representatives from the agencies utilizing SEATs, but I did not know who they were. I was also asked if I had seen the “charter” for this committee and I don't believe I have, but then again, the only charter I remember seeing is the one for the SW Coordinating Group.

Suggestions: a). The National BLM Aviation Office should ensure that the names and agency of each member of the Interagency SEAT Board are included in the ISOG. **Note: The national office has emailed me the names and agencies of the board members and they will be posted on the SEAT web page in the near future.** b). All users of SEATs need to become aware that the SEAT program has a “SEAT Program Request for Revision” form (located in the SEAT web page), that is available for submissions of changes to Policy, Contracts, training, etc. I was informed by the national office that historically, use of this form has been very minimal.

**NOTE: As I stated under “General Findings” I found that interagency use and sharing of SEATs has not only continued to take place, but has dramatically increased. This increase in interagency use and the related issues I have listed in this report, leads me to agree with the suggestions that perhaps the time has come for this program to follow the helicopter program's process in addressing change in the interagency arena by developing an Interagency ISOG Working Group. During my career, I had the opportunity to work at the District, State Office and National Office levels and I am well aware that by establishing a “working group” there is a good chance that addressing and making changes to the program will take more time, but perhaps because of the issues I stated above, it is time to slow the growth of the program down. This may be the time to consider where the program will go from here. The helicopter program has been around much longer than the Single**

**Engine Air Tanker program. . . is it possible that we can avoid some the growing pains that they experienced by learning from their mistakes?**

### **IN SUMMARY**

This SECO was impressed by the improvements in the quality of the SEAT Managers visited and the support given to them by each unit and agency. The professionalism of the pilots and their abilities to meet and adhere to the standards of the program is very commendable and this speaks loads for the contractors. It was obvious to me that interagency acceptance of the program has dramatically increased. Consequently, interagency use and mobilization has increased. There is no doubt in my mind that all the hard work, diligence and commitment that has been given to this program from the few people that have believed and lived to bring this program to where it is today has paid off. Though this program has come a long ways in the Southwest area, there is always room for improvement. We should also ask ourselves if there are opportunities to work more with our neighboring state of Texas and perhaps see an increase in resources available to all of us.

I want to personally thank all of those I worked with for the support and courtesy given to me during this assignment.

/s/ Al Alvarez  
Al Alvarez, SEAT Coordinator

July 15, 2008