



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: June 17, 2008

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT: NIGHT FLYING FOR SAN DIEGO'S AERIAL FIREFIGHTING ASSETS
(DISTRICTS: ALL)

SUMMARY:

Overview

Aerial fire suppression services during a wildfire provide a critical component to the region's overall firefighting strategy. Recognizing the importance of an early first-strike and night flying in general, this legislation seeks to overcome all obstacles of night flying to fight fires.

Night flying is essential to first attack capabilities against a wildfire. It provides a substantial suppression effort that can potentially save lives and homes from out-of-control wildfires. Admittedly, missions are an extremely challenging endeavor that take great skill and advanced technology. Pilots can lose depth perception, topography acuity, and land features when flying at night. Yet, the fact remains that night flying with the proper equipment is possible. Therefore, should the situation present itself during the next wildfire in San Diego, we must ensure every possible step has been taken to give our regional assets the ability to fight fires on a 24-hour basis.

Today's action would authorize the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to explore various avenues available through local agreements, legislative channels, and upgrading current resources to make aerial firefighting capabilities at night a part of our regional efforts to improve wildfire protection.

Recommendation(s):

VICE CHAIRWOMAN JACOB AND SUPERVISOR SLATER-PRICE

1. Direct the CAO to work with CAL FIRE, the United States Forest Service, and the San Diego County Fire Chiefs' Association to establish a local agreement to allow aerial firefighting assets to fly at night in the State and Federal Responsibility Areas.
2. Direct the CAO, with the assistance of our state and federal legislative advocates,

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to pursue any necessary legislative or policy changes to allow nighttime flying of aerial assets in the State and Federal Responsibility Areas.

3. Direct the CAO, with the assistance of our state legislative advocate, to urge the expedited retrofitting and replacement of CAL FIRE's helicopter fleet so that CAL FIRE helicopters have the ability to drop water at night; and for CAL FIRE to permanently base a CAL FIRE helicopter in San Diego County.
4. Direct the CAO to work with the Sheriff's Department and CAL FIRE to explore the feasibility of converting our two County-owned firefighting helicopters so that they have the ability to drop water at night, and report back to the Board in 60 days with recommendations.

Fiscal Impact:

There is no fiscal impact associated with these recommendations.

Business Impact Statement:

N/A

Advisory Board Statement:

N/A

BACKGROUND:

The County of San Diego's 2007 Firestorms After Action Report states, "it is imperative that the region enhance its regional firefighting capability for the first 48 hours of a firestorm, when outside resources are going to be scarce."

The region could have benefited from nighttime aerial firefighting during both the 2003 and 2007 wildfires. For instance, in 2003 the Cedar Fire was first reported at 5:37 p.m. All aircraft, including a County Sheriff helicopter, were grounded until the following morning.

Another example, from the 2007 wildfires, the Witch Creek fire rapidly overtook the community of Rancho Bernardo in the middle of the night leaving many families scattering from their homes with no opportunity to grab personal belongings, precious heirlooms, important documents, or in some cases, family pets. Aerial assets deployed during this horrendous night could have retarded the fire enough to provide families with valuable minutes to grab items deemed irreplaceable.

The region's operational structure during a San Diego wildfire often times includes CAL FIRE or the United States Forest Service as the lead agency for commanding our assets. Both organizations have a demonstrated ability to act in this capacity and have provided exceptional firefighting leadership to San Diego. In these situations, the lead agency's policies and procedures supersede any other authority. We have a unique relationship with these two government organizations and we work together very well. It is our duty, as the leading regional government entity in San Diego, to help foster the outstanding working relationship that has developed to ensure we are making every possible attempt to improve the public safety in our region.

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To advance our mission to improve the firefighting capabilities of the region, we must include night flying by aerial firefighting aircraft in the discussion. Night flying with our aerial assets will provide a much-needed boost to our "surge capacity" as discussed in the County's 2007 Firestorms After Action Report. In other words, suppress quickly and with overwhelming force. Should the conditions and opportunity present themselves, having an established agreement between CAL FIRE, the United States Forest Service, and our firefighting entities to fly at night will greatly bolster our firefighting efforts.

In addition to establishing local agreements for aerial suppression night flying, we must investigate options to modify state and federal policy that may hinder our region's ability to maximize our firefighting efforts. By working with our state and federal governments, the County of San Diego can help to resolve the policies and procedures that affect night flying capabilities and ensure every possible effort has been made to allow night flying.

To maximize safety and improve the capabilities of night flying, substantial upgrades are needed to improve the technology aboard CAL FIRE's helicopter fleet. It is imperative that the State of California understands the County of San Diego's urgency when it comes to improving our night flying capabilities. By actively advocating for retrofitting and replacement of CAL FIRE's helicopter fleet and permanently basing a CAL FIRE helicopter in San Diego County we are stressing our need to include night flying as part of the aerial firefighting fleet. We are strongly communicating our support to fight fires.

Currently, the County of San Diego owns two firefighting helicopters that do not have the ability to fly at night. To explore the possibility of incorporating night flying into our regional firefighting strategy, we must look at the feasibility of retrofitting our own fleet to provide this capability. Retrofitting our two firefighting helicopters with the appropriate technology to fly at night should be considered fully as part of our attempts to improve the firefighting resources in the region.

We have the ability to improve our firefighting capabilities with this action. Given the circumstances of previous wildfires in San Diego, our efforts should no longer be hindered by the circumstances of time. By approving these recommendations we are seeking to remedy one of our glaring weaknesses for firefighting defense.

Respectfully submitted,

DIANNE JACOB
VICE CHAIRWOMAN, SECOND DISTRICT

PAM SLATER-PRICE
SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT

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AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION SHEET

CONCURRENCE(S)

COUNTY COUNSEL REVIEW	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	
Written Disclosure per County Charter Section 1000.1 Required	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
GROUP/AGENCY FINANCE DIRECTOR	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	[X] N/A
Requires Four Votes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	[X] No
GROUP/AGENCY INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY DIRECTOR	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
COUNTY TECHNOLOGY OFFICE	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	[X] N/A

Other Concurrence(s): N/A

ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT: District 2 and District 3

CONTACT PERSON(S):

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