

September 20, 2011

United States Forest Service  
Attn: Chief Tom Tidwell  
Mailstop: 1144  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

**RE: Restoration of Santa Maria Air Tanker Base to Original Full Service Status**

Dear Chief Tidwell,

The County of Santa Barbara Board of Supervisors respectfully requests that the United States Forest Service restore the Santa Maria Federal Air Tanker Base, located in Santa Maria California, back to its original status of “Full Service”.

The Forest Service Air Tanker Base (ATB), located at Santa Barbara Airport since 1958, was relocated to the Santa Maria Airport in 2007 and operated as a Full Service Initial Attack and Extended Attack ATB until March of 2009 when it was downgraded to a Call-When-Needed (CWN) ATB.

Historically, some of the nation’s largest and most destructive wildland fires have occurred in the County of Santa Barbara. Consequently, the ATB is vital to the County of Santa Barbara and to its surrounding areas. Regardless of jurisdiction, the ATB provided initial attack service on all wildland fires in the County of Santa Barbara. The ATB also services Ventura, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey Counties.

The decision by the Los Padres National Forest (LPNF) to downgrade the ATB from a Full Service status to a CWN status has significant initial attack ramifications and was made without prior communication to any of the LPNF mutual aid partners or local government stakeholders. The Fire Chiefs Association of Santa Barbara County was assured that the downgrade would not cause a loss in air tanker production capabilities, nor reduce initial attack capabilities. The Forest Service has also stated that the CWN ATB would be operational within four (4) hours. However, to date, the base has never been opened within this desired 4 hour time frame. Furthermore, the cost of one fire that escapes initial attack costs is equal to many times the salary of the one eliminated base manager position.

The Forest Service further justifies the CWN downgrade by stating that no air tankers are pre-positioned at the ATB. However, the fact that an air tanker is not pre-positioned at the base does

not diminish the base's ability to meet initial attack requirements. Critical retardant drops are lost when air tankers must reload at a Tanker Base farther away than Santa Maria, often resulting in 2 hours more flight time.

Due to the mobility and versatility of air tankers, it is vital that ATBs are always open and operational to support this dynamic aviation operation. The four (4) hour operational time window is too long a time period to delay an air tanker, thus the reason to have the Santa Maria ATB open and operational on a full service basis during high fire season. This is why the original Full Service Santa Maria ATB was so effective prior to being downgraded to CWN status in 2009. Stopping a fire during initial attack reduces suppression costs, limits damage to property and natural resources, and protects firefighters and the members of the public. This is especially true on the Central Coast, which has a long history of widespread wildfires that have devastated the local communities and forests.

The County of Santa Barbara Board of Supervisors believes that a Full Service Air Tanker Base at Santa Maria is critical not only for the County of Santa Barbara Fire Department, but also for the Forest Service, Cal Fire, Vandenberg AFB, all local city fire departments and fire districts, to meet their mission of immediate wildland fire suppression. For these reasons, the County of Santa Barbara requests that you re-establish the Santa Maria Air Tanker Base back to its original Full Service status as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Joni Gray  
Chair  
County of Santa Barbara Board of Supervisors