



BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
AGENDA LETTER

Agenda Number:

Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
105 E. Anapamu Street, Suite 407
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 568-2240

Department Name: Fire
Department No.: 031
For Agenda Of: September 20, 2011
Placement: Administrative
Estimated Tme:
Continued Item: No
If Yes, date from:
Vote Required: Majority

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Department Director Fire Chief Michael W. Dyer (805) 681-5500
Contact Info: Deputy Fire Chief Chris Hahn (805) 681-5501

SUBJECT: Santa Maria Federal Air Tanker Base Letter of Support

County Counsel Concurrence

As to form: N/A

Other Concurrence: CEO

As to form: Yes

Auditor-Controller Concurrence

As to form: N/A

Recommended Actions:

That the Board of Supervisors approve a letter to the Chief of the United States Forest Service requesting that the Federal Air Tanker Base in Santa Maria be restored to its original status as a Full Service Base.

Summary Text:

The initial attack phase is the most critical time period to suppress a newly started fire. Air tankers can respond to new fires from any air tanker base where they have been pre-positioned, or they can be diverted from other fire assignments while in the air. The mobility and versatility of air tankers makes it important that the air tanker bases are always open and operational to support this dynamic aviation operation. Even four (4) hours is too long a time 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 Air Tanker Base was so effective prior to being downgraded to Call-When-Needed status in 2009. Stopping a fire during initial attack reduces suppression costs, limits damage to property and natural resources, while protecting firefighters and the public. The Central Coast has a very long history of large wildfires that have devastated the local communities and forests.

We are concerned that the United States Forest Service does not view the Santa Maria Tanker Base as being vital for our local communities or the region as a whole. Strategically, a Full Service Air Tanker Base at Santa Maria is critical for the Forest Service, Cal Fire, Vandenberg AFB, Local City Fire Departments and Districts and the Santa Barbara County Fire Department to meet their mission of wildland fire suppression. We encourage the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors to request that

the United States Forest Service restore the Santa Maria Air Tanker Base back to its original Full Service status as soon as possible.

Background:

Historically, some of the Nation's largest and most destructive wildland fires have occurred in Santa Barbara County.

The Forest Service Air Tanker Base, 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 Air Tanker Base until March of 2009 when it was downgraded to a Call-When-Needed Air Tanker Base.

Regardless of jurisdiction, the Air Tanker Base provided initial attack service on all wildland fires in Santa Barbara County. The Air Tanker Base also services Ventura, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey Counties.

The decision by Los Padres National Forest to downgrade the Air Tanker Base from a Full Service status to a Call-When-Needed status has significant initial attack ramifications and was made without prior communication to any of the Los Padres National Forest mutual aid partners or local government stakeholders. The Forest Service assured the Santa Barbara Fire Chiefs Association that downgrading the Air Tanker Base would not cause a loss in air tanker production capabilities, nor reduce initial attack capabilities. The Forest Service has also stated that the Call-When-Needed Air Tanker Base would be operational within four (4) hours. To date, the base has never been opened within the desired 4 hour time frame.

Just one fire that escapes initial attack costs the salary of this one eliminated base manager position many times over.

The Forest Service further justifies the Call-When-Needed downgrade by stating that no air tankers are pre-positioned at the Air Tanker Base. However, just because 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.

Fiscal and Facilities Impacts:

Staffing and all operational costs of the Air Tanker Base are the sole responsibility of the Forest Service.

Special Instructions:

Please send a certified copy of the minute order to the Fire Department, attention Rose Pueschel.

Attachments:

Letter to the Chief of the United States Forest Service

Authored by:

Fire Chief Michael W. Dyer

cc: