



Senator Feinstein Questions Forest Service Grounding of Firefighting Air Tankers

Senator Seeks Answers on Emergency Back-up Plans
May 13, 2004

Washington, DC –Senator Dianne Feinstein (*D-Calif.*) raised concern today about the U.S. Forest Service’s decision to ground its fleet of 33 large firefighting air tankers.

On Tuesday, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior announced the termination of the contract providing for the air tankers due to safety concerns about the aircraft. The air tankers are used primarily in the initial attack effort to put out small fires. Of the 33 planes, 14 provide service to California.

The following is the text of a letter sent Wednesday to Ann Veneman, Secretary of the Agriculture Department, which includes the U.S. Forest Service:

“I write to express concern over the Forest Service’s announcement yesterday that it would ground its fleet of 33 large air tankers used for firefighting. I understand that there were serious safety issues with the planes, but I urge you to do everything possible to ensure that your initial attack remains fully effective in responding to new fires, especially those near communities.

The California Department of Forestry (“CDF”) tells me that 14 of the grounded planes provided service to California, 10 based in the State and 4 nearby. CDF has 22 large air tankers itself. This means that 40% of the combined air tanker fleet that serves California will no longer be in service – a potentially serious blow.

I understand that you are proposing to replace the air tankers with other aircraft, mainly helicopters. Can you tell me how many replacement aircraft of which types will be available to fight fires in California?

My major concern is that helicopters and smaller planes will not be as quick or as effective in the “initial attack” effort to put out small fires before they erupt out of control. I understand that helicopters face a delay in setting up portable retardant facilities close to the incident before the helicopters can access the retardant. The aircraft may be able to use nearby water sources, but in some cases water alone is less effective in knocking down fires. Helicopters are also slower flying than the air tankers.

- Can you assure me that helicopters and other replacement aircraft will be equally effective as the grounded air tankers on the initial attack?
- If a single helicopter is less effective than an air tanker, do we need to take other measures, such as replacing part of the air tanker fleet with other air tankers, or replacing the grounded planes with helicopters on a more than one-for-one basis?
- Does Congress need to start budgeting additional funds over the next year or years in order fully to restore our firefighting effectiveness?

As a Californian, I know you appreciate the urgency of the situation our State is facing. I appreciated your recent help in waiving certain local matching funds requirements in Southern California, and I look forward to continuing to work with you as this fire season develops.”

###