



ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL

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September 13, 2012

Congressional Delegate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Federal firefighting airtanker fleet

Dear Congressional Delegate:

I am writing on behalf of the Montana Legislative Environmental Quality Council (EQC) to express full support for Congressional efforts to modernize and grow a safe, efficient, and effective federal airtanker fleet to help fight wildfire across the United States.

As you know, wildfire is a perennial challenge in Montana. Drought, insect kill, and high levels of tree mortality, especially on federal lands, are contributing to tinderbox conditions. As of August 27, more than 829,000 acres have burned and 108 homes and 272 outbuildings have been confirmed lost in 2012.

As the legislative committee that oversees state firefighting efforts, the EQC believes it is imperative to ensure that local, state, and federal agencies have all of the tools they need to work together to fight wildfire and that those tools are in good working order. Airtankers play a critical role in helping to protect communities and firefighters by delivering fire retardant to reduce fire intensity and rate of spread. Unfortunately, the United States Forest Service's (USFS) fleet has been reduced from 43 airtankers in 2000 to nine today. Those airtankers, on average, are more than 50 years old.

While Montana has appreciated the help it has received this wildfire season from Canadian aircraft, the United States should be self-sufficient instead of outsourcing its fire suppression needs. Such a strategy leaves the United States vulnerable if and when Canada is fighting its own fires.

The EQC understands that there is an opportunity for Congress to pass legislation that would transfer a fleet of C-27J aircraft being retired by the United States Air Force to the USFS for use as airtankers and for transport of firefighting cargo and crews. Though the C-27Js are

shy of the desired airtanker capacity, they are just a few years old and could be a cost-effective option for shoring up federal firefighting resources.

C-27Js are not the only opportunity and solution. The EQC asks you, Senator/Representative, to support any legislation that would help bolster and modernize the airtanker program and provide a more capable, nimble fleet that can adequately respond to our country's firefighting needs.

The EQC also respectfully requests that as you consider such proposals, please support funding them with new appropriations, rather than relying on the existing budgets of the USFS, its parent agency, the Department of Agriculture, or the Department of Interior, all of which are already financially strapped to manage the lands and resources under their control.

Senator/Representative, thank you for your time and attention to this matter. Please let me know if I or the EQC staff can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

Senator Jim Keane, Chairman