

DATE ISSUED: October 25, 2002 REPORT NO. 02-252

ATTENTION: Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee

SUBJECT: San Diego Regional Fire And Rescue Helicopter Program Ninety Day Pilot Status Report

REFERENCE: Report No. 02-163, dated July 18, 2002

### SUMMARY

THIS IS AN INFORMATION ITEM ONLY. NO ACTION IS REQUIRED ON THE PART OF THE COMMITTEE OR THE CITY COUNCIL.

### BACKGROUND

The 2002 fire season was expected to be one of the most active in history. To address this situation, on July 22, 2002, the City Council approved a ninety (90) day pilot San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program. Under this Program, the firefighting helicopter would provide multi-mission emergency services to the City and County of San Diego. Fees would not be charged to the county agencies which are signatory to the County of San Diego Fire Mutual Aid Agreement and county law enforcement agencies.

Through a Memorandum of Agreement with the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) and the County of San Diego, San Diego Fire and Life Safety Services (SDFLSS) was authorized to administer the Program. The cost of the Program was estimated at \$470,000. The City of San Diego provided \$190,000 via an allocation from Councilmember Byron Wear's Fiscal Year 2002 discretionary funds. An additional \$230,000 was provide by SAFE and \$50,000 was provided by the County of San Diego. The monies have been deposited into a special City fund.

### DISCUSSION:

The Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter, identified as Copter 1 for radio traffic, went into service on August 8, 2002. Funding has been identified only for the initial ninety-day period. Continuation of the Program beyond November 8, 2002 is contingent upon identification of additional funding. As the agency charged with program administration, San Diego Fire and Life Safety continues to search for funding from sources including the Federal government and corporate/private sponsorship to continue this critical mission beyond the ninety-day pilot. Additional funding from San Diego County and SAFE is also being pursued. San Diego Fire has been working with the City's Corporate Sponsorship and Development Program to facilitate sponsored funding.

The helicopter is positioned at Montgomery Field, which is centrally located within the City and near the population center of the County, and is available county-wide as a regional resource. It is available for immediate response for ten (10) hours each day (0900-1900 hours for the first 45 days and 0800-1800 hours thereafter to adjust to the shortened hours of daylight). The helicopter is required to be operational within one (1) hour of dispatch during the remainder of the twenty-four (24) hour period. The helicopter is continuously staffed with a contract pilot and a SDFLSS crew chief. A trained rescuer, firefighter and/or lifeguard, responds as an additional resource for rescues.

In the City of San Diego, the helicopter is automatically dispatched on all 1<sup>st</sup> alarm or greater vegetation fires and vehicle rescues. The vehicle rescue component complies with the “motorist aid” concept directed by SAFE as a mission priority. Responses to jurisdictions outside the City are coordinated through San Diego’s Fire Communications Center through a direct contact with the other agency’s dispatch center.

The helicopter is also available for technical rescues such as cliff rescues; ocean, bay and lake rescues; and swift water rescues. The helicopter carries a small Holmatro Tool (hydraulic rescue device), a chain saw, and various ropes and harnesses to effect rescues. It is available to haul personnel and equipment to remote locations as it can carry nine (9) persons with equipment in addition to the pilot and crew chief. With this load capacity, the helicopter can be used on a “homeland security” mission to transport Hazardous Incident Response (HIRT) or Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams to critical incidents.

The contractor for the helicopter, Kachina Aviation, has been very responsive in meeting the compliance requirements with this contract. The helicopter is well-maintained, and the personnel are very proficient in their duties and are very professional in their actions. The pilot and other personnel maintain the required licenses and appropriate certifications to operate at emergencies where many aircraft from many agencies are flying. The pilots are skilled in both firefighting and rescue operations, and are eager to train with all personnel to perfect operational techniques required during emergencies.

The helicopter and crews have been training with the City’s Heavy Rescue Unit, lifeguards and other fire units within the City. They have also provided training and safety briefings to other fire agencies in the County. In addition to fire agencies, the helicopter crews have trained with law enforcement agencies such as San Diego Police Air Operations and SWAT personnel and the U. S. Border Patrol BORSTAR helicopter crew members. With this training, the helicopter and crews have demonstrated the ability to be capable of multiple missions with multiple agencies, fire and law enforcement, and with disaster response teams.

As of September 21, 2002, the pilot program has been in operation for 45 days. As of this date, the helicopter was involved in 11 working incidents throughout the County, 10 vegetation fires and one rescue. On the very first day of operation, the helicopter was credited with saving at least one home in the South Balboa Park area from a fire which was moving quickly up a canyon away from where the ground resources were dispatched. On the second day of operation, the helicopter made 43 water drops on a fire in Tierrasanta at the high school and kept the fire from extending to the side of the canyon which was rimmed with structures. By minimizing the spread

of the fire, fire units from other jurisdictions and the City were able to return to service more quickly and thereby be available sooner for response to other emergencies. During these 10 fires, the helicopter delivered over 66,000 gallons of water from 191 water drops (350 gallon water tank).

The lone working rescue incident was in response to a mid-air collision of two light planes in a remote area of the City of Carlsbad near Palomar Airport. The helicopter transported personnel and equipment to the crash site. The aircraft was also used as an aerial command and observation platform. Of the eleven incidents to which Copter 1 responded, five, or 45% of the responses, were outside the City.

The contract expenses for the helicopter and associated services, including the personnel costs are being maintained within the allocated budget. A total budget of \$470,000 was originally allocated for this Program:

\$333,000 for the helicopter for 180 hours of flight time  
\$102,380 for personnel costs  
\$ 34,620 for flight time in excess of 180 hours

An additional \$7,500 for Program equipment has been raised. A private citizen donated \$5,000 and an additional \$2,500 was received from the County.

For the first 45 days, the expenditures for the helicopter contract were \$194,620, for personnel \$33,802, and for other NPE (equipment) \$7,608. Expenses incurred for the helicopter and personnel in the amount of \$17,400 for fires that were located on Federal property (National Forest and Indian Reservation) are reimbursable from the United States Government. Total expenditures for the first half of the Program period (including cost recovery) is \$218,630, which represents 46% of the total available funding of \$477,500.

The helicopter has proven to be a valuable addition to the region's fire and rescue resources during the first 45 days of operation. It is expected that its value will continue to be demonstrated during emergency operations in the remaining 45 days. The helicopter and crew will continue to train both internally and with other agencies to increase the operational efficiency of this dedicated regional resource. This Department will continue to pursue the procurement of additional funding not only for the extension of the pilot Program but also for the establishment of a year-round program.

Respectfully submitted,

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Jeff Bowman  
Fire Chief

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Approved: P. Lamont Ewell  
Assistant City Manager

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