

DATE ISSUED: June 11, 2003 REPORT NO. 03-121

ATTENTION: Honorable Mayor and City Council
Docket of June 17, 2003

SUBJECT: Establishment of the Seasonal San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue
Helicopter Program

SUMMARY

Issues: Should the City Council authorize as follows:

1. Establishment of a countywide Seasonal Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program with helicopter service provided by a private vendor to be operated, managed and administered by San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, contingent on receipt of funds from the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE), the County of San Diego and private donors and sponsors?
2. The City Manager to enter into agreements with the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) and the County of San Diego in order to secure funding for the helicopter program?
3. The City Manager to execute a contract with Kachina Aviation to provide a regional fire and rescue helicopter service, with oversight by San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, contingent on the City's receipt of funds from SAFE, the County of San Diego and private donors and sponsors?

Manager's Recommendation – Authorize as follows:

1. Establishment of a countywide seasonal Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program, with helicopter service provided by a private vendor under the direction of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, contingent on receipts of funds from the Service

Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE), the County of San Diego and private donors and sponsors.

2. Approval of agreements with the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) and the County of San Diego, to accept and disburse funding from these sources for the establishment of a seasonal Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program.
3. A contract between the City of San Diego and Kachina Aviation, for the provision of helicopter services with oversight by San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, contingent on the City's receipt of funds from SAFE and the County of San Diego.

Other Recommendations – None

Fiscal Impact –

The Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) has recommended \$400,000 towards the cost of the program; private donors and sponsors have pledged \$310,300; and the County of San Diego is expected to provide the remaining funding. Additional private donations are also expected.

BACKGROUND

This year's rainfall has produced a good crop of annual grasses, much more than has been seen in the past few drought years. Dry grasses are light flashy fuels subject to almost explosive rates of spread when fanned by even moderate winds. These light fuels are deceptive and have been a major contributor to firefighter injuries and deaths in wildfires. In addition, devastation of local eucalyptus stands by the Red Gum Lerp Psyllid insect is continuing. The dead and dying trees have added a significant fuel load by increasing the ground litter with fallen leaves and dry branches. The dead trees which remain standing present the added danger of falling on and potentially injuring firefighters during suppression activities.

The proposed San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program will ensure the availability of a helicopter for firefighting and rescue operations in San Diego for a minimum of one-hundred and twenty days, during the height of the wildfire season. Due to last fire season's tragic loss of two federal airtankers and their aircrews, the federal government has eliminated 25% of the total air tanker fleet that is normally available during fire season in the U.S. In order to compensate for this loss of fixed wing aircraft and to provide coverage in other areas of the nation, a large capacity federal air tanker will no longer be based and available at the Ramona Air Attack Base. There is one helicopter based in San Diego County provided by the United States Forest Service (USFS). However, this helicopter is considered a national resource and is frequently assigned to incidents throughout the United States where fire activity is occurring.

The San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program will provide multi-mission emergency services to the City and County of San Diego. The helicopter and crew will be available for use, at no cost, to all public safety agencies in San Diego County. Fire agencies that are signatory to the San Diego County Fire Mutual Aid Agreement will also have full access to the helicopter and crew at no cost during the first operational period. Any subsequent cost will be determined by the terms in the Mutual Aid Agreement. The emergency services will include:

1. Wildland Firefighting – The helicopter, pilot and support personnel will be certified by the U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Aircraft Services (OAS) and will provide water drops, personnel and cargo transportation. Through a cooperative agreement with the Sycuan Fire Department and the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the helicopter will be staffed daily with an ICS Type 1 wildland firefighting “Hot Shot” crew.
2. Vehicle Accidents – The helicopter will provide rescue of victims from vehicles on the freeways and highways utilizing trained firefighters with specialized equipment, such as the “Jaws-of-Life.”
3. Water Rescue – The helicopter will transport lifeguards to rescue victims in ocean, stillwater and swiftwater situations through the use of a rescue hoist and/or short-haul rescue system, or by insertion of lifeguards with equipment into the water to conduct lifesaving operations.
4. Technical Air Rescue – The helicopter will use firefighters and lifeguards in the extrication of victims at cliff rescue incidents. It will transport firefighters to and rescue victims from roofs of high-rise buildings involved in fire.
5. Homeland Security – The helicopter will transport technicians and/or medical specialists with equipment and supplies to incidents involving terrorism or accidental release of hazardous materials, explosives and biological agents.
6. Medical Incidents – The helicopter and crew will respond to medical incidents to rescue victims and to coordinate medical transportation by air ambulance or ground ambulance. The helicopter will not be involved in the mission of air ambulance services. Currently, Mercy Air is the only provider of air medical transportation in San Diego County.

In February 2003, the City of San Diego issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for furnishing an operated helicopter with support for a period of one year, with responses due on March 12, 2003. Two proposals were received. San Diego Fire-Rescue Department recommends award of this contract to Kachina Aviation. This company submitted the best value proposal to the City of San Diego based on cost, type of equipment offered and experience.

Kachina Aviation will provide the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program with a Bell 212HP twin turbine helicopter, equipped with a 375 gallon water dropping tank, rescue hoist and searchlight to the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program, for a minimum of 120 days. The helicopter can carry up to ten passengers and their equipment. Additionally, the company will provide the pilots, maintenance engineers, maintenance, fuel, fuel servicing vehicle, fuel servicing vehicle driver, required equipment and insurance.

DISCUSSION

San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) will operate, manage and administer the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program through a Memorandum of Agreement with the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE).

SDFD will manage the program via an out-of-class assignment battalion chief (Program Manager) and six helicopter crew chiefs (Fire Captain level), to coordinate routine daily field operations. Through the County of San Diego Fire Mutual Aid Agreement, on-duty SDFD personnel, both fire and lifeguard, will be transported to rescue emergencies to conduct rescues. SDFD paramedics will not operate as medics in other jurisdictions due to exclusive operating area (EOA) agreements established through San Diego County.

The helicopter and crew will be on-duty primarily during the daylight hours for nine hours each day for response to emergencies and training. The operating period would be extended when a working incident is in progress. During the remaining fifteen hours of the day, the helicopter and crew would be available by callback and required to be operational within one hour of dispatch.

The helicopter and crew will be based at Montgomery Field Airport in Kearny Mesa. The helicopter could be pre-positioned at any time to other locations in the county, based on incident activity levels and weather, thereby lessening the response times to other county areas.

FISCAL IMPACT

The cost of the proposed program is approximately \$808,870. The funding will be provided by the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE), private donors and sponsors and the County of San Diego.

The Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) has recommended \$400,000 towards the cost of the program; private donors and sponsors have pledged \$310,300; and the County of San Diego is expected to provide the remaining funding. Additional private donations and sponsorships are also expected.

No fiscal impact with this action. No General Fund or other City funding is being requested for this program. All program funding will be provided by outside sources.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeff Bowman
Fire Chief

Approved: _____
P. Lamont Ewell
Assistant City Manager

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