

ISSUE #6: IMPROVING AERIAL ASSETS

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Problem

Airborne firefighting assets are a major feature of the wildfire fighting forces marshaled to deal with the large destructive wildfires occurring in Southern California. The San Diego region has the fewest dedicated wildfire aerial assets under local control of any of the highly populated California counties with significant Wildland Urban Interface areas.

Because the most dangerous fires are produced under weather conditions conducive to producing several serious fires simultaneously throughout Southern California, it is essential that the San Diego region obtain additional assets to provide greater self-sufficiency under these conditions.



Solutions

Conclude Agreements For Early Use Of Marine and Navy Helicopters

The City and County of San Diego should put in place ongoing Memorandums of Agreement with local Marine and Navy helicopter commands to provide water dropping, fire crew transportation, and logistics support on call during Red Flag Warning periods. There should be adequate provisions of water drop gear, manager support (if necessary), communications, training, certifications, etc. so this standby force is fully serviceable when needed. The goal would be to have the Marine and/or Navy helicopters able to launch within 30 minutes after a request on Red Flag Warning days.

Additional Fire/EMS Dedicated Helicopters

The city of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) currently operates one medium-lift twin engine multi-mission Bell 212HP helicopter (100 knots/375 gallons capacity) to respond to fire, rescue and emergency medical calls.

Procurement and staffing of a second medium-lift

twin-engine helicopter should be given the highest priority by the city. Currently, the existing city helicopter must be temporarily removed from service for periodic mandatory maintenance and inspections. A second helicopter eliminates this out-of-service time and provides a second helicopter response capability each day. Availability of two aircraft allows simultaneous responses to two geographically separate areas or the option of assigning both to a single incident to increase the impact towards resolution.

The San Diego Sheriffs Department (SDSD) currently operates two medium-lift single-engine Bell 205A1++ helicopters (95knots/375 gallons capacity). Both aircraft are hoist equipped but function primarily for fire suppression during daylight hours only.

Procurement and staffing of three (3) additional medium lift twin-engine multi-mission helicopters should be given the highest priority by the county. The three (3) county and two (2) city helicopters properly staffed 24/7 would ensure prompt response to all regional emergency incidents. A total regional fleet of seven (7) helicopters ensures availability of four (4) to five (5) aircraft at all times. All seven (7) could be available for major fire incidents.

(As a comparison, the Los Angeles City Fire Department operates five (5) helicopters and the Los Angeles County Fire Department operates nine (9) helicopters. This provides 14 helicopters for a region of similar size to San Diego)

Provide An Airborne GIS Platform

In addition to the water-dropping helicopters, a San Diego City light-category helicopter should be acquired, equipped and supported with appropriate staff so the helicopter can be used as an **Airborne Geographical Information System** platform similar to the helicopter **AGIS** program developing in the Los Angeles City Fire Department Air Operations section. This system can reduce the initial response/planning phase for a new major wildfire or other emergency incident from several hours to 30 minutes or less and improve the quality of the response. The system would facilitate more timely, optimal deployment and use of existing resources by providing incident commanders high-quality, complete, real-time information to manage incidents.

Exploratory Contacts To Obtain Additional Surveillance Assets

Exploratory contacts should be made with the California Air National Guard (CANG), Civil Air Patrol (CAP) units in Southern California and the Federal agencies that field the Predator B and Golden Hawk Unmanned Air Vehicle (UAV) systems. Discussions should include the feasibility of providing continuous area surveillance during Red Flag Warning days to identify and locate new fire starts immediately. Also, Marine and/or Navy interest in flying fire reconnaissance missions on Red Flag Warning days should be explored.

Contract Separately For Aerial Support Aircraft Services

LA County Fire, LA City Fire and CAL FIRE contract for seasonal augmentation of their indigenous aerial fire fighting forces. The San Diego region should likewise arrange to contract for supplemental standby aerial support under their direct control. Aircraft potentially available for this type arrangement include AT-802 SEATS (170 knots/820 gallons), Canadian CL-415 Superscoopers (150 knots/1620 gallons), Erickson Skycrane helicopters (95 knots/2000 gallons), Martin Mars (165 knots/7200 gallons), DC-10 (333 knots/12,000 gallons), and others.