



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

AUG - 8 2013

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chair
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
131 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the results of the nationwide assessment of the agency's night flying operations (both the helicopter and fixed-wing portion) as required in House Report 112-589 (p. 78). The Forest Service submits the attached *USDA Forest Service Helicopter Night Operations Study Final Report - August 24, 2010*, and an executive summary of the report.

In August 2012, the Chief of the Forest Service decided to implement helicopter night flying operations. Night flying operations began the week of June 3, 2013, with one contracted medium helicopter and one light fixed-wing aerial supervision aircraft operating out of Fox Field in Lancaster, California. The helicopter and crew will provide 24-hour air support for 180 days. The fixed-wing aircraft will provide night aerial supervision support.

The attached Helicopter Night Operations Study identified 130 mitigation measures that needed to be implemented to establish and maintain a Forest Service contracted helicopter night operations program performing all missions evaluated in the study. The implemented night helicopter operation will be limited to water-dropping missions from fixed ground fill sites only, which reduced the 130 mitigations to 109. These mitigations have been completed, and the Forest Service night air operations were implemented the week of June 3, 2013.

The Forest Service will continue to evaluate the need and use of our helicopter and fixed-wing night flying operations. If there is more demand, the safety and financial risk would be evaluated against the benefit of the program. The intent of the program is to support initial attack and emerging fires where the capabilities of one helicopter can make a difference.

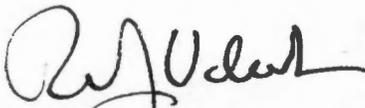
The Forest Service will also continue to utilize cooperator night flying helicopters on an as-needed basis. Cooperators in California have been using FIRESCOPE's Night Flying Guidelines for several years; the Forest Service program tiers to those guidelines to create coordinated and safe night flying operations in southern California.

The Honorable Jack Reed
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In compliance with section 435 of Public Law 111-88, after 45 days this report will be posted to the Forest Service Web site at <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus/budget/congressional-directives.shtml>.

A similar letter and report are being sent to Senator Murkowski and Congressmen Simpson and Moran. If you have any questions please contact Brian Baenig, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, at (202) 720-7095.

Sincerely,

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Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

AUG - 8 2013

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Murkowski:

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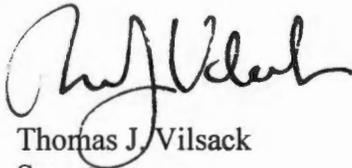
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Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

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Washington, D.C. 20250

AUG - 8 2013

The Honorable Michael K. Simpson
Chair
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
B-308 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

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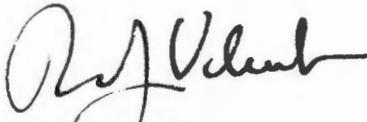
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AUG - 8 2013

The Honorable James Moran
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Moran:

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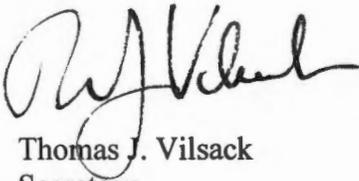
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