



Agenda Item No. _____

File Code No. 150.01

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

AGENDA DATE: September 13, 2011

TO: Mayor and Councilmembers

FROM: Administration Division, Fire Department

SUBJECT: Letter Of Support For Santa Maria Air Tanker Base

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council authorize the Mayor to send a letter to California state senators and area members of congress supporting the restoration of the Santa Maria Air Tanker Base to full service status.

DISCUSSION:

In 2009, the U.S. Forest Service Air Tanker Base in Santa Maria was downgraded from a full service base, to a call when needed base. The closest full service base to our community is now located in Paso Robles, increasing the travel time to our area in the event of a large wildland fire.

Santa Barbara County fire agencies have been unable to persuade U.S. Forest Service officials to reestablish the full service status for Santa Maria Air Tanker Base. This letter of support may assist those efforts.

ATTACHMENT: Proposed Letter of Support

PREPARED BY: Andrew J. DiMizio, Fire Chief

SUBMITTED BY: Andrew J. DiMizio, Fire Chief

APPROVED BY: City Administrator's Office

ATTACHMENT
DRAFT LETTER

August 9, 2011

Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Barbara Boxer
Congresswoman Lois Capps
Congressman Elton Gallegly
Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

I am respectfully requesting your assistance in the restoration of the Santa Maria Federal Air Tanker Base to its original status of "Full Service". The base's downgrade to a call when needed (CWN) status leaves a very large gap in the safety net of the entire County of Santa Barbara that cannot be repaired with local resources. The threat from wildfire is very real for the City of Santa Barbara. In recent years, the Painted Cave, Zaca, Gap, Tea and Jesusita Fires have caused the loss of hundreds of homes and millions of dollars of value within our community. Wildfire is part of life in Santa Barbara. As such, our City actively and cooperatively works with all the local, state and federal stakeholders to mitigate the impacts and be better prepared for the next event. One of our longest standing and most important partners in this area is the U.S. Forest Service.

The Forest Service Air Tanker Base (ATB), located at Santa Barbara Airport since 1958, was relocated to the Santa Maria Airport in 2007 and operated as a Full Service initial attack and extended attack ATB until 2009. At that time, a unilateral decision by Forest Service officials downgraded the Santa Maria full service air tanker base to a CWN status. Long standing safeguards for Santa Barbara were immediately reduced without any public or stakeholder input. Our community's wildfire protective system involves many interactive elements. One part of the system is the application of fire retardant from aircraft during the initial attack phase of a wildfire. Aerial retardant is a critical firefighting tool which can buy time that allows for evacuation of the public, as well as providing safer access for firefighters in our steep Wildland urban interface area, which borders mostly Federal lands.

Currently, the closest available full service ATB is operated by Cal Fire and located to the north in Paso Robles. The additional distance from Santa Maria adds twenty minutes to the turnaround time for the air tankers which restricts the number of applications possible during allowable flight hours. Our most serious fires have occurred in the late afternoon, or early evening, as a result of infamous down canyon "Sundowner" winds which can create catastrophic conditions within an hour. Minutes lost early on can have devastating results to the homes and lives of our community. The downgrade of the Santa Maria ATB seriously hampered the initial suppression efforts on the 2009 Jesusita Fire. Increased turnaround times made containment efforts futile because air tankers required transit to Porterville, instead of Santa Maria, to reload after dropping retardant during the first burning period. In the end, 80 homes were lost, 8,700 acres of watershed burned, 3 firefighters seriously injured, and millions of dollars spent to control this accidental fire.

Since the Jesusita Fire, all the Fire Chiefs in Santa Barbara County have worked countless hours toward reestablishing full service status for Santa Maria ATB. Unfortunately, many questions have been asked, few answers offered, and little progress has been made towards making this happen.

It is my most sincere hope that clear reasons for this decision be publicly discussed at the highest levels necessary. A co-operative solution must be developed and implemented as soon as possible, before the inevitable happens, once again.

Helene Schneider, Mayor
City of Santa Barbara