

Committee on Resources

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Statement of Connie Hirth House Committee on Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Hearing on H.R. 977
September 29, 2004

Good afternoon.

I would like to thank Chairman Walden, the House Resources Committee and Staff for having the Hearing on HR 977, the "Aerial Firefighter Relief Act of 2003".

My name is Connie Hirth. I am the Associated Airtanker Pilots Support/Benefits Chairperson. I'm here today representing the wives, children, and family members of aerial firefighters who have died in the line of duty.

The Associated Airtanker Pilots is a non-profit group made up of multi-engine air tanker pilots; single engine air tanker (SEAT) pilots, heli-tanker pilots, and air attack/lead plane pilots, and associate members such as myself (I'm not a pilot). The main responsibilities of the Associated Airtanker Pilots relate to issues such as safety, flight training, contracting, benefits, etc. I can't even begin to describe the team spirit and closeness of members.

Since the fixed wing air tanker conception in the late 1950's, there has been an approximate loss of 162 aerial firefighters killed in the line of duty. 87 alone have died since Congress enacted Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB). The majority of the pilots killed were flying on local, state, or federal government contracts.

My husband, John Hirth, of Buffalo, Wyoming and his co-pilot, Bill Babka of Columbus, Nebraska, lost their lives April 20, 1997, when their air tanker, Tanker 38, crashed near Blandburg, Pennsylvania. They were on a firefighting mission for a government agency, Pennsylvania DCNR-Bureau of Forestry.

Before John and Bill's arrival in the fire zone, there was a helicopter making drops on the fire. Tanker 38 came to the fire zone and made an aerial sweep of the fire, known as the dry run.

Immediately after dropping the fire retardant on the header of the fire, their tanker encountered smoke which affected visibility. Just as the tanker flew out of the smoke, its right wing hit an oak tree which stood above the timber line.

The aircraft rolled 90 degrees left and flew into the mountainside a quarter of a mile from the initial tree strike. The aircraft exploded on impact and instantly killing John and Bill.

Earlier in the mid 1990's, John had tried to obtain life insurance at least three times, but was denied due to the high risk of his occupation. At the time of my husband's death, I had to borrow the money from my parents for John's funeral. And our business still had to meet payments on the 1997 fire contract operation. I cannot even begin to describe the stress and anxiety that I felt at that time, not to mention the utter devastation in having lost my husband.

I applied several times for PSOB after losing John, but was always denied. I was told John was a contract aerial firefighter, and was not considered a public safety officer, even though he was on an official mission with a government agency. It just didn't make sense to me, and it still doesn't.

One of my closest and dearest friends, Carl Dolbeare, and his co-pilot, John Attardo, died October 3, 2003, when their air tanker, Tanker 99, went down.

It's

rather ironic that both John and Carl will be honored this coming Sunday, another October 3, as America's fallen fire heroes at the National Fire Academy, in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

At the National Fire Academy, there is a stone monument with a sculptured Maltese cross: the traditional symbol of the fire service. Bronze plaques with the names of the fallen firefighters encircle the monument. Carl and John's names will be memorialized and placed there along side their fellow firefighters.

Today, we have a dire need to recognize aerial firefighters and place value to their lives and their family's lives. Today, we need to change a wrong and make it right by protecting families that are not only subject to a devastating loss, but a financial one as well. Today, aerial firefighters need inclusion and the reassurance that they will be covered in their time of need.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today, and will be happy to answer any questions you may have.