

STATEMENT OF LARRY HAMILTON
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR OF FIRE AND AVIATION,
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
H.R. 5102, THE WILDFIRE RESPONSE ACT OF 2002, and
H.R. 5185, THE WILDFIRE RESPONSE ENHANCEMENT ACT

October 10, 2002

Good Morning Chairman McInnis and Members of the Committee. I am Larry Hamilton, Director of Fire and Aviation for the Bureau of Land Management. With me today is Lynn Findley, Manager of the BLM's National Aviation Office. I appreciate the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss H.R. 5102 and H.R. 5185, legislation addressing our acquisition of important aircraft, goods and services needed to fight wildland fires. I want to thank the Committee for its support of the Department's ongoing efforts to continuously improve our wildland firefighting capabilities.

As members of the Committee know, the 2002 wildland fire season has been long and challenging. It began earlier than usual, in the Southwest and Southern Rockies, months ahead of schedule. To date, over 6.67 million acres have burned, the result of numerous conditions, including record, severe drought in many parts of the country.

Despite demanding, dangerous conditions, I am pleased to report that our firefighters have been very successful this season. With funding from Congress which the Department of the Interior agencies used to hire and train additional firefighters, and purchase additional engines and contract for additional helicopters, our firefighters have been more effective than ever, controlling over 99% of all fires on initial attack.

Aviation support is among the most heavily relied upon support we receive in our efforts to fight wildfires, especially during this catastrophic fire season. In many instances, aircraft assistance can and does make a critical difference in controlling a fire upon initial attack. Aircraft are essential in protecting homes and other valuable resources because the water and fire retardant they release reduce the intensity of fire, enabling ground crews to build fire lines when it would otherwise be too hot and dangerous to do so.

Since 2000, increasing demands for specialized aviation resources have resulted in shortages in some categories, particularly large airtankers and helicopters capable of fire suppression missions, including direct attack, firefighter delivery to remote areas and aerial resupply. In 2002, three crashes within the Federally contracted aircraft industry involving aircraft engaged in wildland fire fighting work, one in California and two in Colorado, caused even further shortages in aerial resources by grounding the types of aircraft

involved while investigations proceeded to determine whether the causes of those crashes were attributable to the aircraft. The availability of National Guard and Reserve aircraft fitted with Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) filled some of the void created by these losses and were of inestimable value in mitigating the shortages. In the wake of these terrible tragedies, a joint Blue Ribbon Panel has been established by the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior, to review, among other things, safety management in our aviation program. The panel is expected to release its report by mid-November, 2002.

The contributions of civilian contractors of both airtankers and helicopters are significant. Private industry provides the core of our airborne capability and has always been up to the task. However, the airtanker industry will be seriously challenged to continue uninterrupted the level of service needed by the Department. Newer generation aircraft are not readily available and will not be for some time, and the continued service of some existing air tankers is in question. While the innovativeness of these operators will eventually provide solutions, at least in the immediate future, there will continue to be a need for additional capacity, such as that which might be provided by the National Guard and Reserve MAFFS aircraft, helicopters, crews, and support personnel.

H.R. 5102 provides an exemption to Section 1535 (a)(4) of Title 31 of the United States Codes which states that prior to placing an order for goods or services within the same or another Federal agency, the head of the Federal agency must decide that the ordered goods or services cannot be provided by contract as conveniently or cheaply by a commercial enterprise. We appreciate the sentiment underlying H.R. 5102, and similar type changes that would be made by H.R. 5185, which is to facilitate the Departments of Interior and Agriculture's access to the full range of available firefighting resources - including those in the public sector. However, we believe that sufficient flexibility currently exists under the Economy Act to achieve the objectives of this legislation and, therefore, we cannot support these bills. We will continue to examine ways to ensure that we have timely access to additional private and public sector resources where current contracts or inter-service support providers (i.e., public providers) are already operating at full capacity or the ability of existing contractors or inter-service support providers to respond in a life threatening or significant loss of property situation is in question.

We thank the Committee for its ongoing support of our wildland firefighting efforts. Private industry has been and will continue to be a valuable part of our efforts to fight wildland fire. However, in certain emergency situations, we have augmented this capacity with cost-effective public resources. As stated earlier, we will continue to examine ways to ensure that we have timely access to additional private and public sector resources needed to fight wildland fires. We appreciate the continued bipartisan support we have received from the Congress, and we look forward to working with you as we improve the processes used to support our firefighting efforts.

I will be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have for me.

####