



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Fourth District

JIM DESMOND
Fifth District

DATE: October 21, 2025

05

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

AUTHORITY FOR COUNTY FIRE TO OPERATIONALIZE AN AERIAL FIREFIGHTING PROGRAM, APPROVE THE SINGLE SOURCE PURCHASE AND OUTFITTING OF A SIKORSKY S70 FIREHAWK HELICOPTER, EXTEND AN AGREEMENT WITH SAN DIEGO GAS & ELECTRIC FOR REGIONAL AERIAL FIREFIGHTING RESOURCES, AND ESTABLISH APPROPRIATIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

On January 28, 2025 (16), the Board of Supervisors (Board) took several actions to bolster wildfire preparedness, response, and educational efforts in our region, including directing the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to identify funds to purchase a night-flying helicopter for San Diego County Fire (County Fire) to staff and conduct night-time water drops on wildland fires in our region. County Fire has been working to identify acquisition options, financing, funding for debt payments, staffing, maintenance, and operational support.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), County Fire's operational partner for fire protection and emergency medical services, has fully transitioned to the Sikorsky S70 Firehawk and maintains 16 of these in their fleet for aerial firefighting. The Sikorsky S70 Firehawk has been determined by County Fire staff to be the most effective helicopter platform for attacking wildland fires due to its durability, increased water storage capacity, and ability to remain in the air longer than other platforms. To increase aerial resources in the San Diego region, and through the existing Cooperative Agreement between the County of San Diego (County) and CAL FIRE, CAL FIRE has offered, indefinitely, to cover staffing, fuel, and maintenance costs if the County purchases a Sikorsky S70 Firehawk. San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E) purchased a Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter for firefighting purposes but that helicopter has not yet been deployed. SDG&E has offered to sell their aircraft to the County so that County Fire can utilize this asset. In addition, SDG&E would provide ongoing funding of \$3,300,000 to County Fire's aerial firefighting program, subject to California Public Utilities Commission approval in future years.

Today's actions include authorizing a single source contract with SDG&E to acquire their Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter and a single source contract with United Rotorcraft to outfit the new helicopter to meet CAL FIRE's operational standards. Today's actions would also authorize the

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Director of San Diego County Fire, or their designee, to execute revenue agreements of up to \$5 million annually from SDG&E for a County Fire helicopter program through October 31, 2035, and the CAO to take all necessary actions to operationalize a County Fire helicopter program. Today's actions would also authorize an extension to a long-term agreement with SDG&E that provides other aerial resources to the region and increases available revenue to the County, direct the Auditor and Controller to establish an interest-bearing trust fund to deposit revenues generated from the helicopter program that will be committed to the helicopter program, and establish appropriations of \$23,806,000 million based on bond proceeds.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

1. In accordance with Board Policy A-87, Competitive Procurement, approve and authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting to enter into negotiations with San Diego Gas & Electric and subject to successful negotiations and a determination of a fair and reasonable price, award a contract for a Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter, and amend the contract as needed to reflect changes to services and funding, subject to the approval of the Director, San Diego County Fire or their designee.
2. In accordance with Board Policy A-87, Competitive Procurement, approve and authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting, to enter into negotiations with United Rotorcraft and subject to successful negotiations and determination of a fair and reasonable price, award a contract to complete the outfitting of the Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter to meet California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) standards, and amend the contract as needed to reflect changes to services and funding, subject to the approval of the Director, San Diego County Fire or their designee.
3. Authorize San Diego County Fire to accept up to \$5 million annually from San Diego Gas & Electric for the period of November 1, 2025, through October 31, 2035, for the San Diego County Fire helicopter program and authorize the Director of San Diego County Fire, or designee, to execute all revenue agreement documents, including any annual extensions, amendments, and/or revisions thereto that do not materially impact or alter services or funding levels.
4. Authorize the Chief Administrative Officer, or their designee, to take all necessary actions to operationalize the San Diego County Fire helicopter program, subject to available appropriations.
5. Waive Board Policy A-87, Competitive Procurement, and in accordance with Administrative Code 401, authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting upon successful negotiations and determination of a fair and reasonable price, to award contracts for maintenance, spare parts, and other equipment and services necessary for the Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter to be fully operational, and to amend

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the agreements as needed to reflect changes to requirements, services, and/or funding subject to the approval of the Director of San Diego County Fire.

6. Direct the Auditor and Controller to establish an interest-bearing trust fund to deposit revenues generated by the helicopter program from agreements with San Diego Gas & Electric, CAL FIRE, and the U.S. Government, and other income sources, with all interest earnings allocated to and distributed to this fund. Funds in this trust fund will be committed to debt service payments, maintenance, fuel, staffing, equipment necessary to operate a firefighting helicopter program, and the purchase of new helicopters.
7. In accordance with Board Policy A-87, Competitive Procurement, and Administrative Code 401, authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting to amend contract 567111 with San Diego Gas & Electric, for utilization of other firefighting-equipped helicopters for fire suppression, to extend the contract term for an additional three (3) years plus two (2) additional option years through July 31, 2032, and increase the annual funding up to \$500,000, subject to the availability of funds; and to amend the contract as required to reflect changes to services and funding allocations, subject to the approval of the Director, San Diego County Fire or their designee.
8. Establish appropriations of \$23,806,000 in Finance Other, Capital Assets, based on bond proceeds for the purchase of a Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter. **(4 VOTES)**

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Purchasing an additional night-flying helicopter increases locally available resources to quickly respond to emerging wildland fires that frequently start in rural and isolated communities that disproportionately includes tribal nations, lower-income residents, and senior citizens. By increasing firefighting resources, the County can ensure a more equitable and rapid response that better protects vulnerable populations and their properties from the devastating impact of wildfires.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today's action to authorize the purchase of an additional night-flying helicopter demonstrates the County's ongoing commitment to the region's environmental stewardship. By enhancing the region's firefighting capabilities, the County can better manage the risks of wildland fires that pose threats to both residents and sensitive habitats.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are partially included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Adopted Operational Plan in Finance Other (\$14,250,000). If approved, today's action will increase appropriations and result in an estimated total one-time cost of \$38,056,000 to purchase one Sikorsky S70 Firehawk (approximately \$32,756,000) and to outfit the new helicopter (approximately \$5,300,000). The funding source will be bond proceeds of \$38,056,000. The ongoing debt service payment will be covered by the \$3,300,000 of annual revenue received from San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E)

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through 2027 and thereafter will be subject to approval by the California Public Utilities Commission and will be included in future years Operational Plans. Should SDG&E not provide annual revenue, County Fire would identify alternate funding sources and return to the Board for authorization of any necessary actions and approval of the new funding source(s). Annual staffing and maintenance costs for the helicopter, estimated at \$5.5 million, will be covered through an agreement with CAL FIRE. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years. The establishment of a trust fund for the deposit of funds above the annual operating and financing costs will be committed for the helicopter program.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

On September 8, 2025, the San Diego County Fire Protection District Fire Advisory Board received a presentation on County Fire's proposal to acquire the San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) Sikorsky S70 Firehawk Helicopter, receive revenue from SDG&E for debt servicing, and partner with CAL FIRE for the State to pay for staffing and maintenance costs and voted unanimously, with six (6) members present, to support the recommendations.

BACKGROUND

In January 2025, the Los Angeles region was severely impacted by several wildfires that caused catastrophic damage to several communities. On January 28, 2025 (16), the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to take several actions to support the County of San Diego (County) in mitigating and responding to wildfires including directing the CAO to identify funds to purchase a night-flying helicopter for San Diego County Fire (County Fire) to staff and conduct night-time water drops on wildland fires in our region.

Aerial Resources in San Diego County

CAL FIRE and County Fire work closely to maintain a Cooperative Helicopter Program on behalf of the region. In 2006, CAL FIRE received funding from the State to staff two (2) daytime helicopters through a partnership with the San Diego Sheriff's Office (SDSO). The SDSO owns, flies, and maintains the helicopters, while CAL FIRE employees are responsible for water drops on wildland fires and staffing helitack crews on wildland fires. In addition, these aerial resources perform hoist rescues in isolated and hard-to-reach areas where large vehicles are unable to access residents. In 2021, County Fire added paramedics to SDSO helicopters to allow for immediate medical attention to critically ill or injured patients. In 2024, the collaboration between SDSO and CAL FIRE/County Fire resulted in over 1,400 water drops on wildfires and 159 hoist rescues.

San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E), as part of their Wildfire Mitigation Program, have a long-standing history of providing funding and the staffing of contracted firefighting helicopters in San Diego. In 2015, SDG&E entered a partnership with the County to manage this program and

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provide funding to ensure helicopters were available for all agencies in the region. Under that agreement, SDG&E paid for a limited number of flight hours for local government partners when responding to wildfires with aerial resources in more urban areas. In addition, SDG&E has contracted for helicopters to assist local and State fire agencies with responding to wildfires. Finally, County Fire/CAL FIRE maintain close operational partnerships with San Diego Fire-Rescue and the United States Forest Service to deploy and coordinate aerial resources in the region.

Proposed Helicopter Acquisition

On June 3, 2025 (14), as part of the CAO's return to the Board on wildfire coordination efforts in the region, the CAO noted that County Fire was evaluating acquisition options, financing, funding for debt payments, staffing, maintenance, and operational support to meet the Board's direction from January. County Fire and CAL FIRE staff evaluated several wildland firefighting, night-flying capable helicopters. After careful research and evaluation, it was determined that the Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter (Sikorsky S70) platform was the most effective model for protecting residents and property in our region, compared to other helicopters, for the following reasons:

- Larger and more powerful aircraft
- Greater water storage capacity of 1,000 gallons per drop
- Additional space for more passengers
- Flies at a faster speed
- Longer flight time in the air before refueling
- Previous design for combat zones increases durability

At the State level, CAL FIRE began transitioning all firefighting helicopters to the Sikorsky S70 in 2018. Currently, the State operates 16 Sikorsky S70 helicopters throughout California and recently determined a need to increase the number of aerial resources in San Diego County. CAL FIRE has proposed that if the County purchases a Sikorsky S70, the State will pay for all staffing, fuel, and maintenance, and other operating costs on the helicopter. At no cost to the County, CAL FIRE will extend their training program to the County to ensure first responder safety. In addition, when the County's Sikorsky S70 goes to maintenance, the State will send an available reserve Sikorsky S70 to San Diego County to ensure continuously available night-flying resources in the region. The State's in-kind contribution to County Fire's helicopter program is approximately \$5.5 million annually and represents a significant increase in coordination between the County and State in protecting residents and property in our region from dangerous wildfires.

The proposed arrangement enhances the existing Cooperative Agreement between the County and CAL FIRE to provide exceptional fire protection and emergency response services to residents in our region. Under the Cooperative Agreement, County Fire is responsible for purchasing and maintaining all capital items (i.e. fire stations, vehicles, protective equipment) and reimburses CAL FIRE for the staff to provide fire protection and emergency medical services in the local responsibility areas. A separate Memorandum of Agreement between the County and CAL FIRE

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would be established to cover the County's responsibility to provide the helicopter and CAL FIRE's responsibility to operate, staff and maintain it. Further blending State and local responsibilities will enhance response capabilities for our residents and be financially more efficient to the County by adding an around-the-clock night-flying helicopter capable of water drops and rescues in the region.

San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) purchased a Sikorsky S70 Firehawk helicopter with the intent of utilizing contract staffing to complete water drops on wildland fires by fall of 2026. However, SDG&E is no longer interested in owning, maintaining, and staffing a night-flying helicopter and has offered to sell their aircraft to the County for fair market value. The proposed purchase allows a critical resource to be available in less than a year to protect lives and property in our region.

Funding Strategy

The Fiscal Year 2025-27 Adopted Operational Plan, included approximately \$14 million to purchase a night-flying helicopter. The funding source will be through the issuance of long-term debt through the San Diego County Capital Asset Corporation. To mitigate the financial impact on the County, SDG&E has offered to provide \$3.3 million annually to County Fire for the helicopter program. An additional \$5.3 million is needed to upgrade the helicopter to meet CAL FIRE's operational standards. With CAL FIRE's in-kind staffing and paying for maintenance, SDG&E's annual revenue, and existing County funding, there's no additional financial impact to the County for the larger helicopter with enhanced firefighting capability. Further, the external support from CAL FIRE and SDG&E would allow the County to debt finance the helicopter at 15 years instead of 30 years and create a funding source for future capital. The County expects to issue long-term debt to finance the fire helicopter later this fiscal year as part of a larger long-term debt issuance to meet the needs in the Fiscal Year 2025-27 Adopted Operational Plan. The establishment of a trust fund will allow for the deposit of funds that will be committed for the use of debt service payment related to long-term financing the helicopter and future capital replacement of the helicopter or for other related costs of the helicopter program.

Justification for a Single Source Contract

Under Board Policy A-87, 3A2, the request to purchase a Sikorsky S70 from SDG&E ensures standardization and continuity of operations with CAL FIRE pilots, who will operate the helicopter on behalf of the County. In addition, purchasing the helicopter from SDG&E, a utility service provider, ensures that critical aerial resources capable of protecting lives and property, are available prior to peak wildfire season in 2026. United Rotorcraft has the exclusive right to modify the Sikorsky S70 helicopter and meets the requirement in Board Policy A-87, 2A5. Finally, the request to extend the single source contract with SDG&E for the regional helicopter program meets the requirements in Board Policy A-87, 3A3. SDG&E is the only available funding source for this firefighting helicopter support and the request to extend the current agreement maintains a continuity of services that provide wildfire protection to residents in the region.

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LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed actions support the Community Initiative of the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by increasing wildfire response resources that protect residents and property in our region.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Strong", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andrew Strong for

EBONY N. SHELTON
Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A