



**JIM DESMOND**  
SUPERVISOR, FIFTH DISTRICT  
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

**AGENDA ITEM**

**DATE:** January 28, 2025

**16**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

**SUBJECT**

**PURCHASE OF A TWIN-ENGINE HELICOPTER, NEW WATER TENDERS, A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF FIRE SAFETY IN THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO, AND WAIVER OF BOARD POLICY A-72 (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

**OVERVIEW**

With an urgency underscored by the devastating fires in Los Angeles, today's action enhances fire preparedness and strengthens firefighting capabilities through a multi-faceted approach including:

- **Expanding resources:** Acquiring additional twin-engine helicopters and new water tenders, subject to funding availability.
- **Evaluating vulnerabilities:** Conducting thorough assessments of open spaces and regional water resources.
- **Convening appropriate agencies and representatives:** Return to the Board of Supervisors (Board) for a public presentation on overall wildfire preparedness.

We have seen historic fires throughout California and the western United States in recent years, including the recent fires that ravaged Los Angeles. We must push to prepare for the real risk of wildfire in San Diego, and there should be no greater priority than securing the major equipment firefighters need to fight fires and save lives and property in the San Diego region.

As we continue to learn from past fires in San Diego and the recent fires in Los Angeles, the urgency increases to take immediate, tangible action to make the region safer from devastating fires. While state and regional mutual aid are available, they often require time and approval to mobilize. Ensuring local fire departments are equipped with modern technology and equipment is essential to prevent small fires from escalating into large-scale emergencies.

Twin-engine firefighting helicopters that attacked fires both day and night, and mobile water tenders that filled from various sources and deployed to the front lines were crucial to containing the fires in Los Angeles. San Diego has an opportunity to better prepare and equip itself to reduce and prevent the devastation for the immediate future. For fire prevention, vegetation management and brush clearing are paramount. Fast, effective water transportation is crucial for combating

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wildfires in these areas. As we witnessed in Los Angeles, even areas with urban infrastructure can lose pressure with a loss of power and other issues caused by wildfire, highlighting the need for a mobile, robust fire response.

Currently, County of San Diego emergency responders operate with outdated firefighting equipment. The County's helicopter fleet consists of aging single-engine aircraft that are built out of 1960s and 1970s airframes. Twin-engine, nighttime-capable helicopters are cutting-edge tools in wildfire management. While San Diego County has one such helicopter, it urgently needs an additional, twin-engine helicopter to effectively combat wildfires. Similarly, water tenders—mobile water storage tank trucks—allow firefighters to bring water directly to the front lines, bypassing the need for fixed infrastructure.

Investing in these critical resources will strengthen San Diego County's ability to respond to and prevent wildfires, safeguarding its communities and natural landscapes from future disasters.

**RECOMMENDATIONS  
SUPERVISOR JIM DESMOND**

1. Waive Board Policy A-72 Agenda and Related Process, Section 2.C.2.ii, which establishes required timelines for review when preparing a Board Letter.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to coordinate with the relevant departments to utilize the \$3.75 million grant funds, accepted November 7, 2023 (1), from the U.S. Forest Service for the purchase of a twin-engine helicopter, pursue additional grant funding, and refer to budget the identification of a one-time funding source for the remaining cost unsupported by grant funds, subject to funding availability.
3. In accordance with Section 401, et. Seq., of the County Administrative Code, once funding is available, authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting to issue a competitive solicitation for one dual engine helicopter and upon successful negotiations and determination of a fair and reasonable price, award a contract for a dual engine helicopter and to amend contract as needed to reflect changes to services and funding.
4. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to pursue grant funding and consider during the budget planning process the purchase of additional water tenders for the San Diego County Fire Protection District to serve north county and south county, subject to funding availability.
5. In accordance with Section 401, et. Seq., of the County Administrative Code, once funding is available, authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting to issue a competitive solicitation for additional water tenders and upon successful negotiations and determination of a fair and reasonable price, award a contract for additional water tenders and to amend contract as needed to reflect changes to services and funding.

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6. Direct Chief Administrative Officer to work with the San Diego County Water Authority, municipalities, fire safe councils, and relevant agencies and stakeholders to assess fire related items, including but not limited to the list below, and provide a report to update the Board within 90 days and return to the Board for presentation within 180 days:
  - a. Water supply and hydrant systems: assessment and upgrades, maintenance protocols, water management plans, assessment of additional heli-hydrant sites and opportunities.
  - b. Dam supplies and reservoir management: water release planning and reservoir levels.
  - c. Fire prevention and preparedness: vegetation management, public education, building codes.
  - d. Emergency Response Coordination: interagency collaboration and communication systems.
  - e. Insurance and financial recovery: insurance policy review and disaster relief funds.

### **EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The year-round threat of wildfires disproportionately impacts rural, low-income, and underserved communities in San Diego County, where limited water infrastructure and resources heighten vulnerabilities. Enhancing fire preparedness through investments in helicopters, water tenders, and vegetation management ensures equitable protection for these communities, which often face the greatest risks. By prioritizing modern equipment and proactive strategies, this initiative addresses disparities in emergency response capabilities and promotes safety for all residents, including those in remote and historically under-resourced areas. Collaboration with local stakeholders ensures a comprehensive approach to wildfire preparedness that considers diverse needs and perspectives. These efforts safeguard lives, property, and natural ecosystems, fostering resilience across the county. About 79% of the County's unincorporated area is designated as High or Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones. More than 80% of San Diego County's jurisdictional area qualifies as a disadvantaged unincorporated community based on a San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission report on funding, administration, and performance of the former County Service Area No. 135 (now San Diego County Fire Protection District).

### **SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

This proposed action contributes to the County of San Diego's Sustainability Goal of protecting the health and well-being of all San Diegan residents. Enhancing public safety is of paramount priority for the County's more vulnerable residents.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 2 to purchase a twin-engine helicopter are not included in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Operational Plan in the Sheriff's Office. The total cost of a twin-engine helicopter is estimated at \$18,000,000. Grant funding of \$3,750,000 is available from the U.S. Forest Service. If approved, the remaining cost which is not supported by grant funding, currently estimated at \$14,250,000 pending further coordination with departments, will be referred to the Board's Fiscal Year 2025-26 budget deliberations to identify a one-time funding source,

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subject to funding availability. There will be no additional staff years associated with Recommendation 2.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 4 to purchase additional water tenders are not included in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Operational Plan in the San Diego County Fire Protection District. At this time there is no funding source budgeted to support the purchase of additional water tenders, estimated at \$975,000 each, for a type 1 water tender, which holds approximately 3,000 gallons of water. An additional three full-time staff from CAL FIRE for each tender would also be required to staff each tender. Costs to staff each additional tender are estimated at \$750,000. If approved, this purchase and associated staffing will be referred to the Board's Fiscal Year 2025-26 budget deliberations to identify funding sources, subject to funding availability and may require reallocation of existing funding compared to current year.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 6 are included in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Operational Plan based on existing staff time in the impacted departments. There is no fiscal impact associated with Recommendations 1, 3 and 5; there will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years associated with these Recommendations. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval.

#### **BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

#### **ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

#### **BACKGROUND**

As the lead agency in the County's unincorporated area, the San Diego County Fire Protection District (SDCFPD) serves as the first responder to structure fires and fires on private properties in the wildland/urban interface. Much of the district consists of rural, mountainous terrain that relies on groundwater, making a robust firefighting apparatus essential to prevent devastating fires. San Diego County has already endured catastrophic wildfires, such as the 2003 Cedar Fire and the 2007 Witch Creek Fire, both of which underscore the critical role of rural firefighting equipment in the initial response.

We have seen historic fires throughout California and the western United States in recent years, including the recent fires that ravaged Los Angeles. We must push to prepare for the real risk of wildfire in San Diego, and there should be no greater priority than securing the major equipment firefighters need to fight fires and save lives and property in the San Diego region.

Fires cross jurisdictional boundaries, and the SDCFPD works closely with other fire protection agencies in the region in a cohesive firefighting network. This Board recently made crucial commitments to enhance our regional firefighting abilities, including taking action to increase

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funding as recent as October 8, 2024 (9), for the San Diego County Fire Protection District, Valley Center Fire Protection District, and Deer Springs Fire Protection District.

As we continue to learn from past fires in San Diego and the recent fires in Los Angeles, the urgency increases to take immediate, tangible action to make the region safer from devastating fires. While state and regional mutual aid are available, they often require time and approval to mobilize. Ensuring local fire departments are equipped with modern technology and equipment is essential to preventing small fires from escalating into large-scale emergencies.

Twin-engine firefighting helicopters that attacked fires both day and night, and mobile water tenders that filled from various sources and deployed to the front lines were crucial to containing the fires in Los Angeles. San Diego has an opportunity to better prepare and equip itself to reduce and prevent the devastation for the immediate future. For fire prevention, vegetation management and brush clearing are paramount. Fast, effective water transportation is crucial for combating wildfires in these areas. As we witnessed in Los Angeles, even areas with urban infrastructure can lose pressure with a loss of power and other issues caused by wildfire. Unlike urban areas with extensive water infrastructure and fire hydrants, rural areas, such as our unincorporated communities, lack these resources.

Currently, County of San Diego emergency responders operate with outdated firefighting equipment. Its helicopter fleet consists of two aging single-engine aircraft that are built out of 1960s and 1970s airframes. Twin-engine, nighttime-capable helicopters are the cutting-edge tools in wildfire management. While San Diego County has one such helicopter, it urgently needs additional, twin-engine helicopters to effectively combat wildfires. Similarly, water tenders—mobile water storage tank trucks—allow firefighters to bring water directly to the front lines, bypassing the need for fixed infrastructure.

On November 7, 2023 (1), the Board voted to accept a \$3,750,000 grant from the U.S. Forest Service from the 2023 Community Project Funding/Congressionally Directed Spending. This grant was awarded to the County of San Diego, to partially fund the cost of a twin-engine firefighting helicopter to maintain and improve search and rescue incident response and suppression of wildland fires. The Sheriff's Department will utilize these funds to partially offset the purchase of a twin-engine firefighting helicopter for the Sheriff's Aerial Support to Regional Enforcement Agencies (ASTREA) Unit.

In firefighting, water tenders (also known as water tankers) are specialized vehicles designed to transport large volumes of water to areas that lack a direct water source, such as remote locations or during wildfires. These tenders play a critical role in ensuring that firefighters have a steady supply of water to combat fires effectively. In areas without hydrants, water tenders are vital for maintaining a continuous water supply for fire engines or fire crews that are actively suppressing a fire. Water tenders are designed to be mobile, able to navigate rough terrains, dirt roads, and areas without infrastructure like roads or hydrants. This makes them ideal for responding to fires in diverse environments. Between San Diego County's mountains, deserts, and beaches, there is a need to have a flexible and adaptive fire response apparatus. To better serve San Diego County, a

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need for additional water tenders has been identified. On the ground in Los Angeles, they have proved essential to fighting the mountainous Palisades Fire.

Given the recent catastrophic wildfires in Los Angeles, it's crucial for San Diego County to conduct a comprehensive review of its fire protection strategies and infrastructure to ensure better preparedness and response. Regional partners, such as relevant County departments, the San Diego County Water Authority, jurisdictions, fire safe councils, and relevant agencies and stakeholders should be convened to assess and report on the following:

**1. Water Supply and Hydrant Systems:**

- **Assessment and Upgrades:** Evaluate the current capacity and reliability of water supplies for firefighting, particularly focusing on the adequacy of water available in fire hydrants during peak demand. This might involve upgrading infrastructure such as increasing the number of water mains, or ensuring reservoirs and treatment plants can meet emergency demands, and additional heli-hydrants.
- **Maintenance Protocols:** Establish rigorous maintenance schedules for fire hydrants to ensure they function correctly when needed. This includes regular checks for water pressure and flow rates.
- **Water Management Plans:** Develop contingency plans for water distribution in case of main supply disruptions, including alternative sources or emergency protocols for redirecting water to affected areas.

**2. Dam Supplies and Reservoir Management:**

- **Water Release Planning:** Review policies on water release from dams to support firefighting efforts without compromising water supply for other critical uses. This could involve coordination with water boards to ensure environmental and human needs are balanced.
- **Reservoir Levels:** Explore minimum water levels in reservoirs during high-risk fire seasons to guarantee availability for firefighting.

**3. Fire Prevention and Preparedness:**

- **Vegetation Management:** Strengthen regulations or incentives for defensible space around structures, clearing of dry brush, and strategic use of fire-resistant landscaping. This could include revisiting or amending current ordinances to ensure they meet contemporary fire safety needs.
- **Public Education:** Enhance public awareness campaigns on fire safety, including how to prepare for evacuation, creating emergency kits, and understanding fire weather alerts like Red Flag Warnings.
- **Building Codes:** Review and potentially update building codes to incorporate the latest fire-resistant technologies or materials, especially in wildfire-prone areas.

**4. Emergency Response Coordination:**

- **Inter-Agency Collaboration:** Assess coordination between local, county, state, and federal agencies to ensure a swift and effective response. This includes pre-positioning of resources like fire engines, helicopters, and manpower before high-risk periods.

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- **Communication Systems:** Review emergency alert systems to ensure timely and accurate dissemination of information to the public during fire events. This includes both technological infrastructure and training for officials on how to use these systems effectively.
5. **Insurance and Financial Recovery:**
- **Insurance Policy Review:** Work with state regulators to ensure that insurance policies are available and affordable in high-risk fire areas, possibly revising state laws to support this. This could also involve looking into why insurance companies are withdrawing or increasing premiums in certain areas.
  - **Disaster Relief Funds:** Seek to establish or augment funds or grants for residents to recover from wildfire damage, with particular attention to those underinsured or uninsured.

This comprehensive review and the subsequent legislative actions should not only prevent fires but also at managing them more effectively when they occur, thus safeguarding both the environment and the populace of San Diego County.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today's proposed action supports the Community (Safety) Initiative of the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by ensuring equitable fire service regionwide.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Desmond', with a stylized, cursive script.

JIM DESMOND  
Supervisor, Fifth District

**ATTACHMENT(S)**  
N/A