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## United States Senate

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March 14, 2017

The Honorable Tom Tidwell  
Chief  
United States Forest Service  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Tidwell:


I respectfully request your personal attention to a recent decision by the U.S. Forest Service (the Service) to reduce the number of Type 1 helicopters under national exclusive use contract for 2017 and urge the Service to reconsider this decision. It is my understanding that the decision would cancel contracts for the helicopters based in Helena and Hamilton, Montana, as well as four other Type 1 helicopters across the West. While I believe it is important to find areas of cost savings, I am concerned this decision risks protecting our forests and those living nearby from wildfire.

As I remain supportive of the *Wildfire Disaster Funding Act*, ensuring Montana wildland firefighters are equipped with sufficient resources to protect our communities and our forests has been one of my top priorities. However, in recent years, the Service has continued to reduce resources serving our state, including reductions to NextGen airtanker contracts and the transfer of the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems mission to Reno instead of Great Falls. Through the years, I fought to protect these federal resources for our state just as I fought to allow Montana UH1H helicopters to help fight Montana wildfires in an emergency. Unfortunately, this recent decision may reduce our state's resources yet again.

It is critical to analyze any cost savings in relation to the increased expense and availability of call-when-needed helicopters. I understand that the air tanker fleet has not increased since the 2016 fire season, and therefore, would like to know how the planned reduction in exclusive-use Type 1 helicopters will affect the agency's overall firefighting capabilities. While I anticipate that the Forest Service may plan to rely on call-when-needed helicopters in the absence of these exclusive-use helicopters, I am concerned that these resources may not be available when most needed and may increase costs. As such, I respectfully request a cost comparison for the non-renewed helicopters and equivalent call-when-needed helicopters, an analysis of the Service's decision-making in terminating the six helicopter contracts and whether the Service obtained the input of its agency partners or its own regional fire managers prior to this decision.

While I respect the hard work of agency fire managers and all efforts to spend taxpayer dollars efficiently, I want to ensure our state's firefighting needs will be met as we near the 2017 wildfire season. Thank you for your service to our nation and I look forward to prompt response.

Sincerely,



STEVE DAINES  
United States Senator