

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

STEVE BULLOCK
GOVERNOR



Angela McLean
LT. GOVERNOR

August 21, 2015

Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture
US Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

Secretary Vilsack,

As you are aware, Montana and many states in the West are currently facing a severe wildland fire season that is straining the resources of the entire country. The state of Montana is not only responding with all available crews, equipment, and aircraft, but providing assistance on other state and federal wildfires across the West. On August 16th, I declared a state of emergency in Montana due to the number of wildland fires burning in the state, and the continued extreme fire danger that exists in most Montana counties.

Under this declaration of emergency, Montana is mobilizing two UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter modules to work in tandem with Montana UH-1H (MT-205) helicopters. We are also mobilizing two CH-47 Chinook helicopter modules, which will be available for flying on all fire jurisdictions in the state, including federal lands. It is my understanding that federal fire managers specifically requested mobilization of the CH-47 aircraft for use on federal fire protection, due to the shortage of similar aircraft through the national dispatch system.

I have previously stated to you my concerns related to restrictions placed by the USDA Forest Service on the use of Montana UH-1H helicopters. Our pilots have flown these helicopters on hundreds of missions on wildland fires around the state this summer. The primary goal for DNRC's UH-1H aircraft is initial attack and they are again demonstrating their effectiveness this fire season.

However, wildland fires emerged on federal fire protection in full view of our aviation staff, who watched them grow as federal firefighters waited for other "approved" aircraft to be dispatched from distant locations. I am also aware of fires where state aircraft were above wildfires and instructed not to take suppression actions, due to the fact that the fires were on federal fire protection. This makes no sense, and puts the safety and property of Montanans at risk.

Montana continues to demonstrate that it is capable of developing, maintaining, and operating a safe and effective fleet of firefighting aircraft. At a time where a cohesive response to wildland fire is more critical than ever, I continue to be frustrated by this unwarranted and artificial limitation on interagency use of our aircraft.

I am doing my part to mobilize every available firefighting resource at my disposal, and make them available to all fire protection agencies. I encourage you to do your part by directing leadership within your respective agencies to rescind this unnecessary and artificial restriction on Montana aircraft as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S. Bullock', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

STEVE BULLOCK
Governor