

SANTA MARIA AIR TANKER BASE

Background

Historically, some of the Nation's largest and most destructive wildland fires have occurred in Santa Barbara County.

The Forest Service Air Tanker Base (ATB), located at Santa Barbara Airport since 1958, was relocated to the Santa Maria Airport in 2007 and operated as a Full Service Initial Attack and Extended Attack ATB until March of 2009 when it was downgraded to a Call-When-Needed (CWN) ATB.

Regardless of jurisdiction, the ATB provided initial attack service on all wildland fires in Santa Barbara County under Local Cooperative Agreements and the California Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Stafford Act Response Agreement (CFMA). The ATB also services Ventura, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey Counties.

The decision by Los Padres National Forest (LPNF) to downgrade the ATB from a Full Service status to a CWN status has significant initial attack ramifications and was made without prior communication to any of the LPNF mutual aid partners or local government stakeholders. The Forest Service assured the Santa Barbara Fire Chiefs Association that downgrading the ATB would not cause a loss in air tanker production capabilities, nor reduce initial attack capabilities. The Forest Service has also stated that the CWN ATB would be operational within four (4) hours. To date, the base has never been opened within the desired 4 hour time frame.

Just one fire that escapes initial attack costs the salary of this one eliminated base manager position many times over.

The Forest Service further justifies the CWN downgrade by stating that no air tankers are pre-positioned at the ATB. Just because an air tanker is not pre-positioned at the base, does not diminish the base's ability to meet initial attack requirements. Critical retardant drops are lost when air tankers must reload at Tanker Base farther away than Santa Maria, often resulting in 2 hours more flight time.

Staffing and all operational costs of the Air Tanker Base are the sole responsibility of the Forest Service. However, due to the pressing need for services, the Fire Chief's Association is pursuing a variety of funding options to address critical day to day operating costs.

Request

The initial attack phase is the most critical time period to suppress a newly started fire. Air tankers can respond to new fires from any air tanker base that they are pre-positioned at, or they can be diverted from other fire assignments while in the air. The mobility and versatility of air tankers makes it even more important that the air tanker bases are always open and operational to support this dynamic aviation operation. Even four (4) hours is too long a time to delay an air tanker, thus the reason to have the Santa Maria ATB open and operational on a full service basis during high fire season. This again, is why the original Full Service Santa Maria ATB was so effective prior to being downgraded to CWN status in 2009. Stopping a fire during initial attack reduces suppression costs, limits damage to property and natural resources, while protecting firefighters and the public. The Central Coast has a very long history of large wildfires that have devastated the local communities and forests.

Our local agencies have assisted the Forest Service when they needed assistance in;

1. Staffing Incident Management Teams (IMT), with qualified managers, equipment and firefighters.
2. Providing expertise during fires wholly on National Forest lands, when All Risk emergencies occur within their incidents. i.e. Medical Aids, hazmat, aviation crash rescue, medivacs, hoisting operations, extractions, vehicle crashes etc.
3. Providing fire stations to permanently house Forest Service fire engine companies and helitack bases at little to no expense to the Forest. (Santa Barbara City Station 7, Ventura County Station, Santa Ynez Airport).
4. Providing funded projects for FS crews when their budgets were short.

Finally, we are concerned that the Forest Service does not view the Santa Maria Tanker Base as being vital for our local communities or the region as a whole. Strategically, we believe that a Full Service Air Tanker Base at Santa Maria is critical for the Forest Service, Cal Fire, Vandenberg AFB, Local City Fire Departments and Districts and the Santa Barbara County Fire Department to meet their mission of wildland fire suppression. We encourage the Santa Barbara County legislative committee and the full Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors to request the USFS to re-establish Santa Maria ATB back to its original Full Service status as soon as possible.