

## **Joint Transportation Committee -- Study on Aviation Search and Rescue**

### **Washington State Air Search and Rescue History**

- The Washington State Aeronautics Commission was established in 1947, and operated as an independent entity until 1977, when its duties were transferred to the newly established Transportation Commission and the Department of Transportation (DOT).
- The Air Search and Rescue Program was implemented in 1967 and funded through a pilot's registration fee.
- RCW 47.68.380 outlines the responsibilities of the Aerial Search and Rescue Program and makes the aviation division of the DOT responsible for the conduct and management of all aerial search and rescue within the state. This includes search and rescue efforts involving aircraft and airships. The division is also responsible for search and rescue activities involving electronic emergency signaling devices such as emergency locator transmitters (ELT's) and emergency position indicating radio beacons (EPIRB's).
- When the program first moved to WSDOT, it was known as the Aeronautics Division. In the mid-1990s its name was changed to the Aviation Division (AD).
- In 1996, Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 468-200 was implemented, requiring that all emergency workers be registered with the WSDOT-AD in order to be involved in air search and rescue missions. The WAC also requires that emergency workers meet all training requirements for their specialty as set out by WSDOT-AD in order to become qualified and registered.
- When the location of a downed aircraft is identified, the incident becomes a land search and rescue operation under the direction and control of the chief law enforcement officer in whose jurisdiction the incident is located.
- In 2005, SSB 5414 repealed the \$15 pilot registration fee and eliminated the aircraft search and rescue safety and education account. The aviation fuel tax was increased from 10 cents to 11 cents per gallon, with the additional revenues deposited into the Aeronautics Account. Air Search and Rescue is presently funded from the Aeronautics Account at approximately \$400,000 per biennium. The program is funded for one FTE, rescue training, operation of a search and rescue plane, and limited volunteer reimbursements.
- In Fiscal Year 2012, the Air Search and Rescue Program was transferred within WSDOT from the Aviation Division to the Emergency and Security Operations Office of the WSDOT Maintenance Program.

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### **Recent Legislative Proposals and Studies related to WSDOT Aviation and SAR activities**

#### 2001:

The 2001 Transportation Budget (ESSB 5327) included a proviso that directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to conduct a performance audit to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of removing the entire aviation division from WSDOT.

#### 2002:

The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) completed a study evaluating the option of removing the Aviation division from WSDOT and creating a separate Department of Aviation. They concluded the Aviation Division should remain at WSDOT.

#### 2003:

A WSDOT Search & Rescue Study Team developed recommendations to consider "efficiencies, issues and emerging trends" in aviation SAR. Study recommendations focused on SAR operation and protocol improvements within the existing WSDOT aviation program. Recommendations included developing a comprehensive SAR plan, improving the SAR volunteer base, and developing an outreach and communications strategy for SAR.

#### 2007:

A Decision Package was submitted by WSDOT to move SAR responsibility from WSDOT to the state Military Department. During the budget process the topic of moving Aviation SAR was discussed by various parties including the Governor's Office, Washington State Patrol, the state Military Department, and WSDOT. No funding was proposed to be transferred with the duties of aviation SAR and this proposal did not move forward. Reasons given by WSDOT for the proposed transfer included consolidation of all SAR responsibilities, cost savings to the state, more revenue for other aviation activities, removal of duplication of effort, and more effective coordination of SAR. WSDOT acknowledged there would be a need for a specialized staffer for aviation SAR wherever it was housed.

#### Draft Bill 0123.1

This bill proposed transferring responsibility for aviation SAR to the state Military Department and was part of the WSDOT budget decision package.

#### 2012:

Senate Bill 6430 proposed transferring responsibility for aviation SAR to the state Military Department.

The 2012 Transportation Budget (ESHB 2190) included a proviso directing the Joint Transportation Committee to examine SAR in Washington.