

USE AND COST OF HELICOPTERS FOR WILDLAND FIRE SUPPRESSION REVIEW

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

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STATE OF WASHINGTON
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REVIEW COMMITTEE

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Why a JLARC Review of the Use and Cost of Helicopters for Wildland Fire Suppression?

In Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6444 (2010), the Legislature directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to complete a report on the use and cost of helicopters by the Department of Natural Resources for wildland fire suppression.

DNR Responsible for Fighting Wildland Fires

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the state's largest on-call fire department with 1,400 temporary and permanent employees who fight wildland fires on any of the 12.7 million acres of state, private, and tribal forest lands. In the 2009 fire season, DNR crews fought 1,045 fires, with nearly 95 percent of the fires being kept to less than 10 acres.

Helicopters are one of the tools used in DNR's efforts to suppress wildland fires quickly. Helicopters are used to:

- Drop water and fire retardant on fires;
- Deliver firefighting crews and supplies in difficult areas to access; and
- Observe and direct other resources to where they are most needed.

Three Ways to Acquire Use of Helicopters

There are three ways for DNR to acquire the use of helicopters for fighting wildland fires:

- It can maintain its own helicopters;
- It can make arrangements with other governmental entities for the use of their helicopters; and
- It can make arrangements with private owners of helicopters.

DNR currently uses all three of these options for fire suppression. The agency has eight helicopters in its fleet and leases one from the Chelan County Fire District. DNR makes use of private helicopters on a call-when-needed basis. It also has arrangements with other governmental entities, such as the US Forest Service, for assistance in fighting wildland fire which includes the use of helicopters.

DNR Expenditures for Helicopters

The cost of fighting wildland fires varies each year, but over the past five years, DNR has averaged \$28.5 million per year in fire suppression expenditures. The average annual expenditure for helicopters was \$2.2 million (7.6 percent of total fire suppression costs). Of this amount, \$1.8 million was for DNR helicopters and the remainder was for private helicopters, US Forest Service reimbursement, and the Chelan County Fire District lease.

Study Scope

The JLARC performance review will examine whether it is more advantageous to the state for the Department of Natural Resources to use DNR helicopters for wildland fire suppression or to make other arrangements for helicopter support.

Study Objectives

- 1) How does DNR determine how many helicopters will be needed for wildland fire suppression and the best mix of DNR helicopters and other arrangements?
- 2) How do DNR's costs for maintaining and operating its existing helicopter fleet compare to costs of entering into other arrangements for use of helicopters that are privately owned or owned by nonstate governmental entities?
- 3) What is the availability of helicopters that are privately owned or owned by nonstate governmental entities that are sufficiently outfitted to participate in wildland fire suppression efforts by the Department of Natural Resources?
- 4) How does Washington's use and funding of helicopters for wildland fire suppression compare to the use and funding of similar helicopters in other western states?

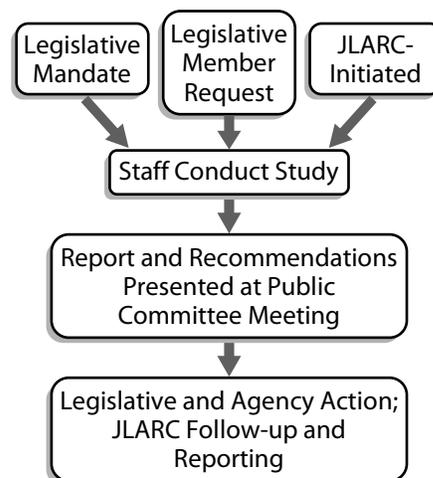
Timeframe for the Study

Staff will present the preliminary report in December 2010 and the proposed final report in January 2011.

JLARC Staff Contact for the Study

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JLARC Study Process



Criteria for Establishing JLARC Work Program Priorities

- Is study consistent with JLARC mission? Is it mandated?
- Is this an area of significant fiscal or program impact, a major policy issue facing the state, or otherwise of compelling public interest?
- Will there likely be substantive findings and recommendations?
- Is this the best use of JLARC resources? For example:
 - Is JLARC the most appropriate agency to perform the work?
 - Would the study be nonduplicating?
 - Would this study be cost-effective compared to other projects (e.g., larger, more substantive studies take longer and cost more, but might also yield more useful results)?
- Is funding available to carry out the project?