



DNR Helicopter Use and Cost

Proposed Final Report

Joint Legislative Audit & Review Committee
January 5, 2011

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Study Mandate

In 2010 Supplemental Operating Budget (ESSB 6444), JLARC was directed to conduct a review with the primary question being:

Is it more advantageous to the state for DNR to operate its own helicopters for wildland fire suppression or to enter into exclusive use contracts with private vendors?

It costs less for DNR to operate its own helicopters.

DNR is Responsible for Suppressing Wildland Fires Across the State



- DNR fights wildland fires on 12.7 million acres of state, private, and tribal forest lands
- In the 2009 fire season:
 - DNR crews fought 1,044 fires
 - 95% of fires were kept to less than 10 acres
 - Average cost of fires under 10 acres is \$3,100
 - Average cost of fires more than 100 acres is \$884,000
 - Fire suppression expenditures totaled \$30.1 million of which nearly \$2.2 million was for DNR operated helicopters

Helicopters Are Used to Aid in Suppressing Wildland Fires



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.

Options in Helicopter Types and Arrangements



- Three different types of helicopters (light, medium, and heavy) with different payload and passenger capacities and different costs
- Four arrangements for helicopters:

1. Operate own	Availability guaranteed
2. Exclusive use contract	Availability guaranteed
3. Call-when-needed	Availability not guaranteed
4. Interagency agreement	Availability not guaranteed

DNR Arrangements and Expenditures for Helicopters in 2009



- DNR operates and maintains nine medium helicopters at a cost of \$2.2 million
 - Includes one helicopter leased from Chelan Fire District #1 for \$186,000
- DNR uses call-when-needed agreements
 - DNR paid \$278,000 to private vendors
- DNR has interagency agreements
 - DNR paid \$300,000 to USFS (and USFS paid \$200,000 to DNR)

DNR Helicopter Costs Are Less Than Exclusive Use Costs



Option	2009 Estimated Costs
DNR Operating Own Helicopters 9 medium helicopters	\$2.2 million (actual)
Exclusive Use – Option A 6 medium helicopters for 120 days	\$4.6 - \$5.4 million
Exclusive Use – Option B 6 medium helicopters for 60-180 days	\$4.1 - \$5.0 million
Exclusive Use – Option C 4 medium helicopters for 90-180 days 2 light helicopters for 60 days	\$3.8 - \$4.5 million

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Washington Arrangements and Costs Compared to Other States



State	How Acquired	Avg Total Cost per Flight Hr
Washington	Operate Own	\$2,750
California	Operate Own	\$2,483
Montana	Operate Own	\$2,820
Idaho	Exclusive Use	\$5,500
Oregon	Exclusive Use	\$6,696

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Cost Difference Due to DNR Receiving FEPP Helicopters



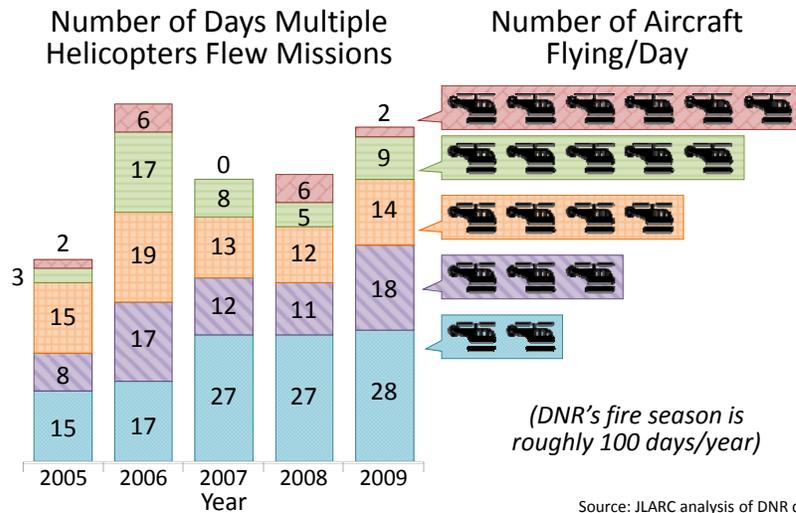
- Federal Excess Personal Property program (FEPP) provides surplus military helicopters to states through the US Forest Service for fire fighting purposes
 - DNR paid \$1 for an indefinite lease and half a million dollars for refurbishing and properly equipping each helicopter
 - Private vendor would pay \$3.5-5.5 million for the same helicopter

Other Considerations



- Washington does not own the helicopters and cannot sell them or recover any of its investment if it disposes of them.
- It would be costly to switch to exclusive use contracts and then later reverse that decision.
- JLARC did not find any private vendor helicopters located in Washington rated to carry firefighting crews and only 3 rated to deliver water and supplies.

DNR's Fleet of Nine Helicopters Might Be Larger than Needed



Recommendation



DNR should conduct an analysis of how many helicopters should be in its fleet and how many helicopters must be maintained for immediate deployment and report to JLARC and the fiscal and natural resources committees of the Legislature by June 2011.

DNR and OFM Concur

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