

United States Senate

February 22, 2016

Thomas L. Tidwell
Chief
United States Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1111

Dear Chief Tidwell,

In light of pending force structure changes within the Air Force, I urge your agencies to consider reassigning the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFs) units currently housed and maintained by the 145th Airlift Wing to the 120th Airlift Wing in Great Falls, Montana.

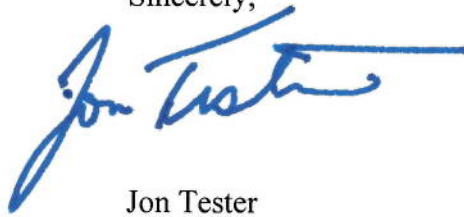
As the Defense Department and Air Force are well aware, the Montana Air National Guard is a particularly ideal fit for MAFFs. Having this capability would ensure the State of Montana is better able to provide a rapid response to the growing number and severity of fires in recent years. Given the size of our state - roughly the size of the nation's entire northeastern corridor - that rapid response capability is absolutely critical, and would contribute to saving lives and untold amounts of homes, businesses, ranches and other property. And the location of the 120th in Central Montana makes it a much more ideal location, particularly in contrast to a location east of the Mississippi River, where MAFFs have much less use operationally.

It should also be noted that the men and women of the 120th are well-trained and accustomed to operating in mountainous terrain, the environment most conducive to the formation of severe wildfires.

The Montana Air National Guard also enjoys a close working relationship with the United States Forest Service (USFS), and several Guardsmen within the 120th are USFS employees. A MAFFs unit in Great Falls would bring welcomed relief and augmentation to the wildfire suppression efforts of the USFS. Wildfire-related costs now consume more than half of the USFS's budget, and it is estimated that by 2025, these costs could consume up to two-thirds of that budget. MAFFs that are centrally located in Montana would undoubtedly provide a vital resource that would immediately bolster the wildfire suppression and firefighting efforts of the USFS.

As the Senior Senator from Montana, my top priority is ensuring the safety and security of the citizens I represent. Protecting Montana communities from wildfires and ensuring our folks on the ground are able to safely and effectively address the threat from wildfires is a key component of that charge. That is why I strongly urge you to consider my request to reassign these MAFFs units to the 120th. Doing so would ensure that our state and states throughout the Pacific Northwest are better prepared and able to work quickly and effectively to address the growing threat of wildfires to all of our communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester

COMMITTEES:

APPROPRIATIONS
BANKING
INDIAN AFFAIRS
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

United States Senate

February 22, 2016

Deborah L. James
Secretary
United States Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

General Mark A. Welsh III
Chief of Staff
United States Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

General Frank J. Grass
Chief
National Guard Bureau
1636 Defense Pentagon Suite 1E169
Washington, DC 20301-0001

Dear Secretary James, General Welsh and General Grass,

In light of pending force structure changes within the Air Force, I urge your agencies to consider reassigning the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFs) units currently housed and maintained by the 145th Airlift Wing to the 120th Airlift Wing in Great Falls, Montana.

As the Defense Department and Air Force are well aware, the Montana Air National Guard is a particularly ideal fit for MAFFs. Having this capability would ensure the State of Montana is better able to provide a rapid response to the growing number and severity of fires in recent years. Given the size of our state - roughly the size of the nation's entire northeastern corridor - that rapid response capability is absolutely critical, and would contribute to saving lives and untold amounts of homes, businesses, ranches and other property. And the location of the 120th in Central Montana makes it a much more ideal location, particularly in contrast to a location east of the Mississippi River, where MAFFs have much less use operationally.

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I have also sent a letter to Chief Tidwell of the U.S. Forestry Service.

Sincerely,

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Jon Tester