

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 14, 2007

The Honorable Carl Levin
Chairman
Senate Armed Service Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John McCain
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ike Skelton
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen and Ranking Members,

We are writing you to request that you restore funding to maintain the 36th Rescue Flight (RQF) and its assigned helicopters stationed at Fairchild AFB and the search-and-rescue (SAR) capacity it provides to our region. We are concerned that the President's Budget did not include funding for the 36th RQF in the FY 08 Budget. We are committed to seeing the funding restored.

The primary mission of the 36th RQF is to support the 336th Training Group and the Air Force Survival School. In addition, it plays a critical role providing support to civilian SAR missions, and has since 1972. They have made over 500 civilian saves and rescued dozens of Survival School students injured in the wilderness training area to bring total saves to over 600.

The 36th RQF heroic track record is due in large part to its unique and unmatched capabilities. They are on standby 24 hours a day, six days a week. The 36th RQF crews are equipped with night vision goggles and the platforms are outfitted with Forward Looking Infra Red to facilitate extremely effective search operations. The helicopters are also equipped with 250-foot hoists and forest penetrators and are crewed by fully trained paramedics. These unique features allow the 36th RQF to conduct emergency medical evacuation of the injured from remote locations and provide immediate treatment. The pilots of the 36th RQF are full time and highly trained to fly in adverse weather conditions—not uncommon in the region.

The 36th RQF is critical because no similar SAR assets are available in our region. MedStar, the regional air ambulance, has neither search nor rescue capabilities. The Spokane County Sheriff's helicopter has limited search capabilities and no rescue capabilities and relies on volunteer pilots. The Army National Guard located at Fairchild AFB operates between one and three Blackhawk UH-60s depending on exercise schedule, but neither have SAR trained crews, vertical hoists, medics or night vision goggles, and the Blackhawks are currently being prepared for deployment.

The nearest Air Force unit with similar capability is the 40th Helicopter Squadron at Malmstrom Air Force Base. The 40th has a primary mission of security for the 23,500 square mile missile complex. When all ground-crew efforts have been exhausted, Malmstrom helicopters will respond to requests from the Joint Rescue Center to assist in search and rescue missions, as a limited secondary mission. Malmstrom responds to search and rescue requests in Montana and in portions of Idaho and Wyoming. They are the nearest Air Force helicopters but are not available for SAR missions in Washington or Oregon.

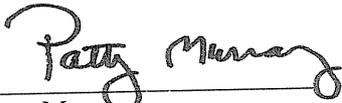
This January, the 36th RQF made three saves in four days. First, they located and rescued a father and son snowmobiling pair who had become stranded in deep snow. After the pair survived one night in subfreezing temperatures, ground rescuers' efforts stalled when their vehicles were disabled. The 36th RQF sent two helicopters and, after finding the lost father and son, transported them directly to a hospital. Three days later, a woman broke her leg while snowmobiling in rough terrain. Though ground crews were able to reach her and provide medical care, a ground evacuation was impossible. The airmen used night vision goggles to locate the victim and flew her to medical care as temperatures dipped below zero.

The only means of search and rescue for hunters, hikers, skiers and even the students at the Survival School would be ground teams. Last month, a snowmobiler fell over a 30-foot cliff and broke his leg, pelvis, and suffered serious internal injuries. The helicopters were grounded due to extreme weather. Ground teams from the Survival School deployed. The rescue took over 13 hours. This would be the norm if the 36th RQF is deactivated. The slower response time could increase the risk to lost or injured individuals.

The preservation of the 36th RQF would sustain compliance with Section 1085 of the 2005 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 108-375) which requires certification of equivalent search and rescue capabilities will be provided, without interruption in the case of reduction or elimination of search and rescue assets. None of the alternative regional assets are equivalent.

Deactivating the 36th RQF would leave an alarming void in the SAR coverage in the Northwest. We encourage you to protect the 36th RQF and maintain the lifesaving capabilities it provides. As your Committee begins to prepare the fiscal year 2008 Defense Authorization bill, please consider this request. We, collectively and individually, do not have a financial interest in this request, and neither do any of our spouses.

Sincerely,



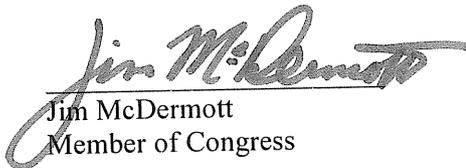
Patty Murray
United States Senator



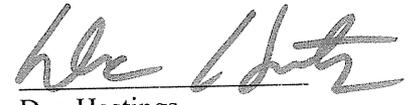
Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



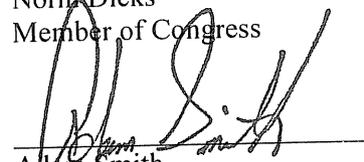
Norm Dicks
Member of Congress



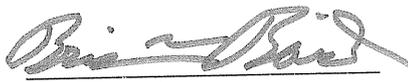
Jim McDermott
Member of Congress



Doc Hastings
Member of Congress



Adam Smith
Member of Congress



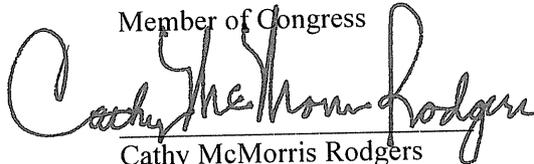
Brian Baird
Member of Congress



Jay Inslee
Member of Congress



Rick Larsen
Member of Congress



Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Member of Congress



Dave Reichert
Member of Congress



Greg Walden
Member of Congress