



BUSINESS PUTS \$1M TOWARD PERMANENT FIRE HELICOPTER FOR COUNTY

By: **ADRIENNE** A. AGUIRRE - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ---- Sunroad Enterprises announced Friday that it will pledge \$1 million toward the county's purchase of a firefighting helicopter that will be available to the region on a permanent basis in the event of another fire.

Meanwhile, the county Board of Supervisors will vote Tuesday on whether to allocate \$3.5 million for the purchase of a county-owned helicopter.

"The city has one. The county is getting one," said Darren Pudgil, spokesman for Supervisor Ron Roberts. "We hope to have it up in the air by the summer."

A recent study by the city of San Diego showed the region needs three permanent firefighting helicopters and fire officials noted Friday that most counties have at least one helicopter permanently available.

The implications of not having a helicopter permanently stationed in the region hit home during the October wildfires.

Currently, the city of San Diego leases a twin turbine helicopter from Kachina Aviation in Idaho on a month-to-month basis. The helicopter is based at Montgomery Field in Kearny Mesa but had been returned to Idaho when the lease ran out two days before the Cedar and Paradise fires hit in October. It was brought back two days later to help battle the blaze and is scheduled to remain until June 30.

"We simply ran out of funding," said San Diego Fire Chief Jeff Bowman on Friday. "After the onset of the firestorm, it became clear to everyone that the county should have a regional operated aircraft."

Sunroad, a San Diego-based company that owns the Maderas Golf Resort in Poway, will pay out \$1 million over the next five years, said Wayne B. Meyer, Sunroad Automotive president at a press conference Friday. The first \$240,000 will go to offset the cost of the current lease and a minimum of \$200,000 a year toward a permanent helicopter program.

It costs near \$3.5 million to purchase a helicopter and from **\$1.5** to \$2 million a year to staff, operate and maintain it, officials said.

The city of San Diego is approaching the second phase of its study, which will focus on where to station a helicopter, who will operate it and how much it will cost. Once the cost is determined, the county Board of Supervisors will decide whether to allocate funding for operating expenses, Pudgil said.

Sunroad representatives said, in light of the state's budget problems, businesses and individuals should **step** in to offset the cost of a permanent fire and rescue program to protect the county. Although \$1 million is a step in the right direction, business officials said, the county still has a way to go.

"What we really need now are corporations like ourselves to get behind **this**," Sunroad Vice President Rick Vann said. "You don't have to be a big company. Every little bit helps."

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