

October 12, 2021

The Honorable Steve Daines
United States Senate
320 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Daines,

As you are aware, Neptune Aviation (Neptune) is the owner and operator of 9 Bae-146 firefighting airtankers based in Missoula, Montana, where we employ 200 highly skilled individuals. Neptune primarily performs under federal contracts through the US Forest Service, with the mission of combating wildland fires across the United States. We have recently reviewed the September 24, 2021 guidance published by the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force regarding the requirement for all federal contractors and subcontractors to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and are anticipating a significant impact on our ability to perform our work for the US Forest Service. The mandate has the potential to impact our performance at our current anticipated level, as well as our ability to maintain a highly talented workforce.

While we remain committed to getting our employees vaccinated, a significant portion of our workforce is stating that they are not willing to comply with a mandatory vaccine requirement and will leave the industry if it becomes a requirement. This could be extremely damaging to the aerial firefighting industry, as our workforce is comprised of highly specialized people. For example, an Initial Attack Captain takes anywhere from 3 to 5 years to fully train. The national pool of individuals who are qualified to perform this job is quite limited and finding people to replace those that leave before the next fire season will be extremely difficult.

With the vaccine mandate being applied to the entire aerial firefighting industry, we fear that not only will we lose valuable, talented employees, but our ability to perform our contractual obligations may be severely impacted due to the potential loss of these people. This is an industry wide disruption that will have a negative consequence on the entire wildland firefighting response. The aerial firefighting industry is already short-staffed and struggling to meet the demand of longer more intense fire seasons. Under the current guidance, federal contractors are not given any flexibility to regularly test our unvaccinated employees. We believe that having this option in place could prevent our industry from the impending workforce attrition.

We are open and interested in finding a solution that works for the US Forest Service, the aerial firefighting industry, and Neptune, and I look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Best Regards,

Jennifer Draughon