Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–3302

December 12, 2024

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Johnson and Leader Jeffries:

We write to urge you to fully fund the President's request for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) three next-generation hurricane hunter aircraft in the fiscal year 2025 disaster supplemental appropriations.

NOAA currently has two WP-3D aircraft capable of flying directly into hurricanes to collect critical data necessary for National Weather Service meteorologists to better measure and understand tropical systems. The data collected from these aircraft are essential to improving the accuracy of a hurricane's track forecast and intensity. When hurricane hunter aircraft are deployed in a storm system in the Atlantic basin, the critical data that is obtained leads to improvements in forecasts of storm intensity by 15 - 20% and of storm track by 10 - 15%, which is on the order of 20 - 25 miles.[1] This refined information can make a substantial difference for coastal cities regarding evacuation orders and other emergency measures. These improved forecasts allow emergency managers to make well-informed, actionable decisions that protect lives and livelihoods and mitigate economic losses.

The need for new aircraft is more urgent than ever as the rapid intensification of tropical storms and hurricanes becomes more common,[2] and hurricane activity impacts a greater area of the U.S. coast.[3] Atlantic storm activity in 2024 has been above normal, with 19 named storms and 5 major hurricanes leading to what is likely to be the second-costliest U.S. hurricane season on record (following the 2017 season).[4] This fall, Hurricanes Helene and Milton devastated the U.S. southeast region. Notably, both storms underwent dramatic rapid intensification as they approached landfall, and the forecasts for both storms were aided by NOAA hurricane hunter missions.

NOAA's aircraft are also used to measure winter systems that impact the U.S. west coast, Hawaii, and Alaska, including the devastating atmospheric rivers that led to 20 deaths in California in the winter of 2023. It is imperative that coastal communities continue to build resilience to climate change, and an important aspect of that resiliency is being well-informed of incoming storms. The use of NOAA's aircraft for atmospheric river reconnaissance missions can also aid reservoir managers working to increase water storage in drought-prone regions of the western U.S.[5]

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[1] Sippel et al. 2022. *Weather and Forecasting*. https://doi.org/10.1175/WAF-D-22-0058.1
[2] Jewson and Lewis. 2020. *Oceans*. https://doi.org/10.3390/ocean1040021
[3] Knutson et al. 2019. *B. Am. Meteorol. Soc.* https://doi.org/10.1175/BAMS-D-18-0189.1
[4] https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/overview
[5] https://scripps.ucsd.edu/news/new-report-confirms-benefits-forecast-informed-reservoir-operations-lake-mendocino

Unfortunately, NOAA's two existing aircraft are aging and will reach the end of their lifetime in 2030. These aircraft continue to have significant maintenance and technical problems, and the required repairs are grounding them during times when storm data is desperately needed.

As you know, NOAA has developed a plan to replace the WP-3D with C-130J aircraft and to obtain two additional C-130J aircraft due to the increasing demand for storm data.[6] It will take six years for each of the new aircraft to be built and modified with the meteorological sensors necessary for data collection. With the 2030 deadline for the operational lifespan of the WP-3D aircraft looming, it is essential for NOAA to act now to secure the hurricane hunters necessary for the coming decades.

We are grateful for the initial funding provided in the Fiscal Year 2023 disaster supplemental appropriations act. That downpayment has enabled NOAA to enter into a pre-production contract for two C-130J aircraft.[7] However, the balance of the funding needed to fully secure these two aircraft must be provided this calendar year to ensure there is no gap in coverage come 2030. The President's disaster supplemental request also addresses NOAA's need to expand its hurricane hunter fleet, and we urge you to further support the acquisition of a third C-130J plane as requested. As evidenced by the maintenance issues of the current fleet, two planes will not be sufficient to meet the growing demand for data to provide forecasts for hurricanes and atmospheric rivers.

We must ensure that NOAA has the resources it needs to fulfill the National Weather Service's mission to protect life and property. Again, we strongly urge you to include in the disaster supplemental appropriations sufficient funding for NOAA to fully acquire, at minimum, three C-130J aircraft.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress

Thomas H. Kean, Jr.
Member of Congress

Julia Brownley
Member of Congress

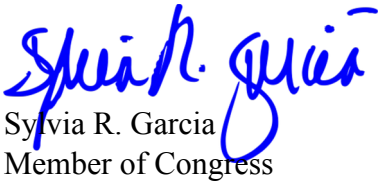
Eric Sorensen
Member of Congress

[6] https://www.omao.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/2022_Aircraft_Recapitalization_Plan_Final.pdf
[7] https://www.noaa.gov/news-release/noaa-awards-contract-for-next-generation-hurricane-hunter-aircraft

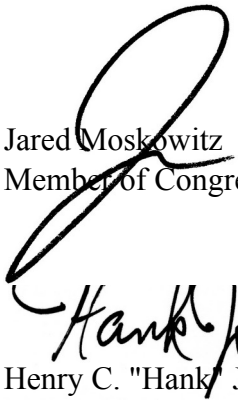
Kevin Mullin
Member of Congress

Jeff Jackson
Member of Congress

Zoe Lofgren
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space,
and Technology



Sylvia R. Garcia
Member of Congress



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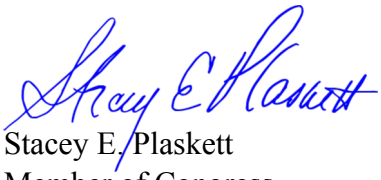
Member of Congress



Stacey E. Plaskett
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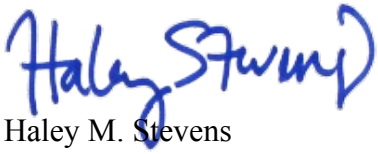

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