



SOUTHERN GROUP OF STATE FORESTERS

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September 4, 2025

April Cameron, President
Chattanooga Airport Authority Board
1001 Airport Road
Chattanooga, TN 37421

RE: Wildfire Suppression Aircraft Lease at Chattanooga Airport

Ms. Cameron,

I am writing to you today on behalf of the Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF) to express our thanks to the Chattanooga Airport Authority Board (Board) for the space it has leased to the USDA Forest Service (USFS) for the past 30+ years for housing wildfire response aircraft, and to voice our support for the continuance of this lease. We recognize and appreciate the ongoing prioritization of limited space for a function essential to natural resource and community protection across our multi-state area.

SGSF is a non-profit organization that represents the State Foresters from 13 southern states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. At SGSF, our mission is to provide leadership in sustaining the economic, environmental and social benefits of the south's forests. The South has 245 million acres of forests, 86% of which are privately owned. Our state agency members have as their mission to support the health of all the forests, but in particular to provide assistance to private landowners. A key aspect of this role is the provision of wildfire response across all jurisdictions (federal, state, municipal, tribal and private), to protect lives, communities, and vital resources. We are longstanding partners with the USFS, including through the sharing of wildfire aviation assets.

In the past decade, the airtankers housed at the Chattanooga Airport have flown numerous critical wildfire-response missions. While the aircraft are owned by the federal government, these missions are not limited to use on federal lands. Through state-federal resource sharing agreements, states can ask for these aviation resources to be mobilized in support of fire suppression on state and private lands as well. Attached is a table of some of the most critical missions over the past decade flown out of the Chattanooga Airport, both federal and state-supported, and the benefits of those missions in terms of estimated values at risk saved. As noted in the table, the combined impact stretches across 10 states, with at least \$2.4 Billion in estimated values at risk saved.

We understand that the Board is considering other lease options for some or all of the area within the historical USFS lease. We request that any changes allow large airtankers to continue to safely operate in the space, including being mindful of air wash impacts. Additionally, we support the vision of the USFS to expand air resource availability at the airport to include rotor-wing aircraft, which are also essential pieces of the wildfire suppression fleet across the South. Aviation resources will be increasingly important in the next decade, as our region deals with an accumulation of downed trees and other debris from Hurricane Helene that turn to fuel for wildfire as it dies and dries out.



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In summation, the current configuration of the USFS-leased area at the Chattanooga Airport enables the successful housing of wildfire response airtankers that serve our entire region. We hope that this critical function can remain, or even be expanded, under any changes the Board is considering to leased space.

Thank you for your consideration, and we are happy to provide at your request any additional information on the benefit of the leased space to state wildfire protection.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rob Farrell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Rob Farrell
State Forester, Virginia Department of Forestry
Chair, Southern Group of State Foresters

Chattanooga Airport Tanker Base Wildfires Supported - 2015 through current

Fire Name	Date	State	Jurisdiction agency*	Aircraft used**	Structures/Values Threatened	Estimated Value at Risk***
ALABAMA						
Lake Chinnabee	Fall 2016	AL	USFS	LATs	20 residences 17 other structures	\$5 million
Martha's Fire	Fall 2016	AL	NPS	LATs	30 residences	\$6.6 million
FLORIDA						
The 344	Spring 2025	FL	FLFS	LATs	None reported in 209	
GEORGIA						
Bell Rd	Fall 2016	GA	GFC	LATs	50 residences 65 other structures	\$27.8 million
Rough Ridge	Fall 2016	GA	USFS	LATs	46 residences 2 other structures	\$18.6 million
Tatum Gulf	Fall 2016	GA	GFC	LATs	160 residences 2 commercial 110 other structures	\$80 million
West Mims	Spring 2017	GA	USFWS	VLAT	320 residences 7 commercial 6 other structures	\$136 million
Big Ridge	Spring 2025	GA	USFS	LATs	53 residences 1 communication site 3 other structures	\$22.5 million
KENTUCKY						
Cat Hollow	Fall 2022	KY	USFS	LATs	20 residences	\$5.3 million
MISSOURI						
Carty	Spring 2015	MO	USFS	LATs	20 residences 12 other structures	\$6.5 million
NORTH CAROLINA						
Silve Mine	Spring 2016	NC	USFS	LATs	15 residences 2 other structures	\$5.1 million
Whipping Creek	Spring 2016	NC	NCFS	LATs (CL415)	0 Homes or Structures	
Boteler	Fall 2016	NC	USFS	LATs	160 residences 37 other structures	\$58.2 million
Chestnut Knob	Fall 2016	NC	NCFS	LATs	77 residences	\$26.2 million

Dick's Creek	Fall 2016	NC	USFS	LATs	31 residences	\$10.5 million
HWY 151	Fall 2016	NC	NCFS	LATs	None reported in 209	
Martin Trail	2016	NC	USFS	LATs	No 209	
Party Rock	Fall 2016	NC	NCFS	LATs	1000 residences 50 commercial	\$390 million
Tellico	Fall 2016	NC	USFS	LATs	109 residences 227 other structures	\$60.3 million
Black Bear	Fall 2023	NC	USFS	LATs	I-40 Interstate commerce	Multiple days of interstate commerce
Collett Ridge	Fall 2023	NC	USFS	LATs	16 residences	\$5.4 million
Sugar Fork	Spring 2024	NC	USFS	VLAT	None reported in 209	
Black Cove	Spring 2025	NC	NCFS	VLAT LATs	175 residences 8 commercial 75 other structures	\$75.1 million
Freedom Farm	Spring 2025	NC	NCFS	LATs	50 residences	\$17 million
SOUTH CAROLINA						
Pinnacle Mt	Fall 2016	SC	SCFC	LATs	809 residences 27 commercial 300 other structures	\$296.7 million
Table Rock	Spring 2025	SC	SCFC	LATs and VLATs	1300 residence 1 other structures	\$390 million
TENNESSEE						
Bluff Mtn	Spring 2016	TN	TDF	LATs	44 residences	\$8.2 million
Halls Top	Spring 2016	TN	USFS	LATs	71 residences 1 communication site 1 other structures	\$30 million
Railroad Grade	Spring 2016	TN	USFS	LATs	10 residences 15 other structures	\$5.8 million
Cliff Topps	Fall 2016	TN	TDF	LATs	30 residences	\$12 million
East Miller Cove	Fall 2016	TN	TDF	LATs	10 residences	\$4 million
Flipper Bend	Fall 2016	TN	TDF	LATs	45 residences	\$12.6 million
Miller	2016	TN	USFS	LATs	No 209	
Neddy Mt Rd	Fall 2016	TN	TDF	LATs	150 residences	\$60 million
Wolf Creek	Fall 2016	TN	USFS	LATs	None reported in 209	
Woodcock	Spring 2025	TN	TDF	VLAT	50 residences	\$20 million

TEXAS						
Hidden Pines	Fall 2015	TX	TFS	VLAT	400 residences 7 commercial 75 other structures	\$155 million
North Side	Fall 2015	TX	TFS	VLAT	50 residences	\$17.5 million
Holcomee Rd	Spring 2020	TX	TFS	LATs	48 residences 114 other structures	\$28.8 million
VIRGINIA						
Matts Creek	Fall 2023	VA	USFS	LATs	100 residences 20 other structures	\$49.2 million

** Federal jurisdiction agencies include USFS – US Forest Service, USFWS – US Fish and Wildlife Service and NPS – National Park Service. State jurisdiction agencies include FLFS – Florida Forest Service, GFC – Georgia Forestry Commission, NCFS – North Carolina Forest Service, SCFC – South Carolina Forestry Commission, TDF – Tennessee Department of Forestry, TFS – Texas A&M Forest Service*

***LAT = Large Airtanker; VLAT = Very Large Airtanker*

****Estimated Value at Risk was calculated based on a search of state average residential values. Other structures were calculated based on 30% of average residential. Commercial values are estimated at \$1 million*