

Testimony of: John D. Yingling

Director of Public Safety, County of Lycoming

SUBJECT: The relocation of home stationing of PSP assets – Trooper 4 / H-4 from the Williamsport Regional Airport to the Hazleton Airport.

DATE: June 7, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on impacts and emergency services concerns on the relocation of critical Pennsylvania State Police Aviation assets from the Williamsport Regional Airport in Montoursville, PA (Lycoming County) to the Hazleton Airport in Luzerne County. I have served as the Director of Public Safety for the County of Lycoming since August of 2009 and have been an active participant in the region's emergency services community spanning three decades. Whereas I do understand the needs of the Commonwealth to review program cost and efficiencies, especially with the current fiscal concerns; the current plan for the consolidation/relocation of PSP helicopters is not in the best interest of public safety.

The reallocation of both fixed wing and especially rotary wing (helicopter) assets from the Williamsport Regional Airport has had a negative impact on law enforcement, search and rescue, and the overall public safety of the residents of and visitors to Lycoming County. Lycoming County has five north/south flowing stream watersheds that are prone to flash flooding. As recently as September 7/8, 2011, flooding impacted the County following Tropical Storm Lee. During the record flooding event, the PSP Helicopter, Trooper -4, assisted immeasurably with coordinating rescues and assisted directly with the successful rescue of 8 persons. Similar stories of successful assistance with water rescues occurred during the January 1996 flooding.

Lycoming County has a land mass of 1,200 plus square miles with rugged forested terrain covering much of the northern and western parts of the county and an urbanized area along the banks of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. The 120,000 plus year round residents of Lycoming County, combined with additional thousands of college/university students, gas field and related energy development project workers, and tourist, all either work, travel, and especially on weekends, visit our miles of streams, trails, and paths in the many remote areas. . When they become lost or in peril, our rescue and EMS resources have always relied upon the rapid response of Trooper 4 (H4) and its specialized search equipment to locate lost children and adults in a timely manner. During a recent training session of the County's EMA Coordinators with Trooper 4 (H4), I can best summarize what was demonstrated, Trooper4 (H4) is the best asset available to find individuals who are lost that want to be found and the best asset to find those who are looking not to be found (suspects "on the run"). Unfortunately this is a resource that is no longer locally available.

In addition to search and rescue capabilities, the helicopter has been a great asset to assist our local law enforcement agencies during vehicle and foot pursuits, area searches, and airborne observation

support for tactical operations and related events. This is an asset that currently is not available locally. This puts the life safety of local officers at risk.

Lycoming County has been impacted by the exploration and extraction of Natural Gas from the region as part of the Marcellus Shale Gas activity. As of June 1, 2012, Lycoming County has 239 addressed well pad (many with multiple wells per pad). Additionally, many water impoundments, compressor stations, launchers/receivers and miles of pipeline right of ways have been constructed in the County. The County has also experienced a growth of wind turbines along the northern tier with construction ongoing near Ralston, PA. These energy development activities have created the increased risk for criminal acts targeted at the energy infrastructure of the nation. The ability to have aerial observation capabilities as well as a rapid response by law enforcement via aviation capabilities is keynote to the protection of these assets and the environment alike. It should be noted that during forest fires in the Marcellus Shale activity area during 2011, Trooper-4 played an important role in scouting the fire area, identified the direction of fire spread, and helped guide fire fighting crews to the area. In 2009, Trooper 4 was utilized by DPS to transport an industry expert to a remote portion of Lycoming County involving a problem at a gas well. If these instances were to occur today, the asset needed is not locally available.

In all these scenarios, flight time to the scene of an incident and the ability to fly based upon weather conditions are keynote. The Williamsport Regional Airport is at an elevation of 529 feet above sea level, whereas the Hazleton Airport is at 1601 feet above sea level. When stationed at the Williamsport Regional Airport, the helicopter was able to fly missions with low cloud ceilings (approximately 500') with the unit currently stationed at Hazleton with a higher elevation, concerns of "grounding" due to weather are considered to be a limitation of the asset.

The Department of Public Safety ask that the Commonwealth reconsider the return of a PSP helicopter to the Williamsport Regional Airport based upon the growth of Marcellus Shale assets and other energy projects in the County, combined with the excellent facilities available at the local airport.