

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 12, 2012

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

We would like to thank you for your continued support of the Aerospace Control Alert (ACA) mission over the Southwest region of the United States. As you know, the California National Guard's 144th Fighter Wing in Fresno, with a detachment in Riverside, California, has been performing this mission for over 50 years. Now more than ever this mission remains critical for the safety of the Southwest United States.

As part of the enacted FY 2012 defense budget, the 144th Fighter Wing will convert from F-16 aircraft to the F-15 aircraft in August. The F-15 aircraft is a superior platform and will significantly enhance the Wing's ACA mission for the Southwest region of the United States as well as their air superiority mission in support of joint operations around the globe.

With our support, the 144th Wing has been preparing for the F-15 conversion for several years. More than half of the support equipment required for the conversion is on hand and maintenance training will begin in May. The Wing's operations facility is over 30 percent complete and five pilots have been trained to fly the F-15, four more are scheduled for July, and an additional four experienced pilots have been hired. The Environmental Impact Study is on target to be completed July 15 with the first of 21 assigned F-15s scheduled to arrive at Fresno mid-August. The Wing will have 18 F-15 aircraft by January 31, 2013, with the balance arriving next May.

We are concerned that recent discussions over reexamination of the FY 2013 Air Force budget proposal have brought forth consideration of eliminating the 144th Fighter Wing and backfilling the Wing's air defense mission using aircraft, personnel and equipment from other states. We believe the argument for this proposal is an effort to eliminate the Air National Guard manpower and equipment losses to other states at the expense of California.

At the February 28th House Armed Services Committee hearing, Air Force Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz, stated that he supported the move of F-15 fighter jets from Montana to Fresno, California. Specifically the General said, "F-15s are better utilized on the West Coast." We agree with General Schwartz that the F-15s must be fielded in Fresno for the 144th Fighter Wing in August of this year.

To shift the F-15s away from the West Coast would increase costs to the federal government at the expense of homeland defense. Because the 144th Fighter Wing is located at the Fresno International Airport, the Air Guard is afforded 24/7 operational capability. In addition, the 144th Fighter Wing enjoys a zero-rent lease from the city of Fresno through the year 2047, because the city understands the positive job creation and long-term economic impact the operation will have on the community.

For these reasons and more, we urge you to proceed with the relocation of the F-15 aircraft from Montana to ensure preparations remain on schedule and aircraft will begin arriving in Fresno mid-August 2012.

Sincerely,



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Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



XAVIER BECERRA
Member of Congress



KEN CALVERT
Member of Congress



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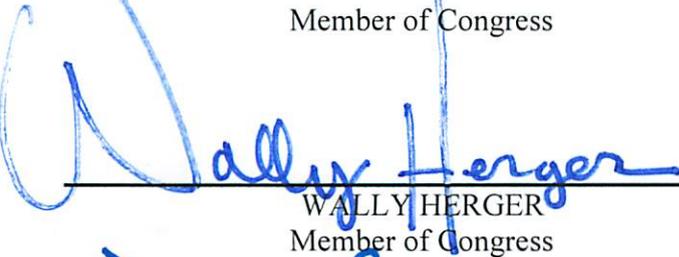
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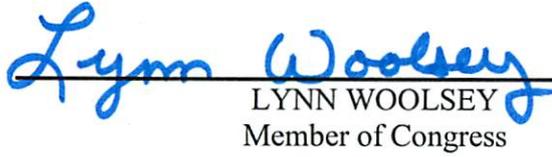
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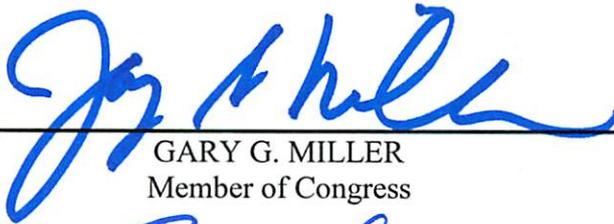
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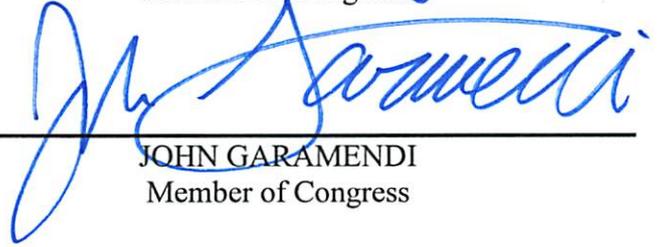
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