My Turn

Colorado needs its own aerial firefighting fleet

By Steve King

Re: *Caution on air tanker decision" March 24 editorial.*

The Denver Post editorial board advises state lawmakers to take a step back and evaluate the necessity of a statewide aerial wildfire-fighting fleet. Instead, I suggest we wake up, open the windows, and smell the smoke.

Despite acknowledging last year's "devastating" fire season, the board asserts "more work should be done in defining the problem" before a solution is crafted. This, I submit, is typical "paralysis by analysis," an approach aptly demonstrated by the federal government for the past 12 years as we watched our federal wildfire air fleet dwindle from 44 air tankers to nine functional tankers in 2013.

The evidence is clear and the problem is thoroughly defined: Colorado has nearly 4 million acres of dead trees and is still languishing in a 12th straight year of drought. Only last year, Colorado suffered six fatalities, lost 647 homes, and incurred $48.1 million in fire suppression costs.

Our state faces a clear and present danger: We are one chance lightning strike, one errant match toss or one arsonist's blaze from a catastrophic wildfire that could dramatically change our state. God help Colorado (as well as the other lower basin states) if catastrophic fires continue to mar Colorado watersheds.

A state-operated aerial wildfire-fighting fleet (including reconnaissance aircraft, helicopters, and air tankers) is crucial in ensuring Colorado's wildfire security. The Colorado Firefighting Air Corps amplifies the state's ability to swiftly identify developing fires, grants rapid response capability in containing growing fires, and provides concentrated suppression in coordination with fire crews in protecting lives, homes, infrastructure and other vulnerable assets from fire.

Access to adequate aerial fire suppression during threats to life and property from wildfire is the difference between the proactive protection of Colorado and the reactionary (and enormously short-sighted) approach advocated by the editorial board. Colorado, like California, must take control of our wildfire security and destiny. To not support the Colorado Firefighting Air Corps, with everything Colorado has to risk, must be viewed as nothing less than a critical failure on the part of the legislature and the governor's office.

Sen. Steve King, R-Grand Junction, represents Senate District 7, which includes Mesa County. He and Democratic Sen. Cheri Jahn of Wheat Ridge are behind a bill directing Colorado to develop its own aerial firefighting fleet.

Attachment B