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Senator Loren Leman District G

For Immediate Release: April 6, 2001
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Leman Responds to Inaccurate Stories

(JUNEAU) - Sen. Loren Leman issued the following written statement, responding to two stories that ran in the Anchorage Daily News on April 6, 2001 that falsely suggested the addition of funds for fire fighting planes to the state operating budget:

“The Anchorage Daily News ran two stories on April 6, 2001 regarding the Senate Finance subcommittee for the Department of Natural Resources and its preliminary recommendation that the state use an amphibious aircraft, the Canadair CL-215/415, for firefighting. These articles contain inaccuracies and I’d like to set the record straight.

In the first article, Joe Stam, the State of Alaska’s fire program manager, is quoted as saying he was “stunned” when he heard that his budget contained money to lease these aircraft. Actually, there is no money in his budget for these aircraft. Not \$700,000 not \$70,000, not \$7.

State Forester Jeff Jahnke is quoted as saying that “No one on the subcommittee talked to our fire program manager or other experts about the aircraft.” This suggests that the DNR subcommittee did not work with the department. This is not true. As the subcommittee discussed these aircraft, we had Mr. Stam’s written comments in front of us. He expressed concerns in his report, but he did state that “the aircraft could be utilized by the State if they were available at a reasonable cost.” This is a direct quote.

We talked to firefighters who have had actual experience in Alaska with this aircraft. Several said that when the plane was used on the Harding Lake fire near Fairbanks it made a big difference in getting that fire out. Other Alaska firefighters said that if the planes had been used on the Donnelly Flats or Carla Lake fires, those fires would not have gotten so out of control.

I had my staff contact other states who have used the aircraft. Their comments will be heard during the public hearing scheduled on this topic for Monday, April 9. The hearing will be in the Fahrenkamp Room in the State Capitol at 1 p.m., and I invite anyone who wants to get the facts to attend or listen via teleconference.

The side story that also ran on April 6 dredges up a bribery scandal from the 1980s. I don’t appreciate any suggestion that what someone else did 20 years ago regarding receiving or offering a bribe is at all related to our careful consideration of using these aircraft to help defend against fire. While this allegation is not specifically made in the article, the fact that it ran at all creates the impression of wrongdoing on the part of the subcommittee members.

I’m disappointed by the reporting in these Anchorage Daily News stories. Alaskans deserve better. If an employee of the Department of Natural Resources precipitated this article, I am likewise disappointed. My relationship with the Commissioner and other upper management at DNR has been professional and cordial. They have assured me that to their knowledge this article was not promoted by anyone within the Department. I hope this is true.

The decision on whether or not to use these planes for firefighting will be made on the merits, to try to save Alaskan lives and property. Any other interpretation is simply wrong.”

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