Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 14, 2015

The Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-1000

Dear Secretary Mabus:

We are writing to you about a matter of great concern about the future of the search and rescue (SAR) mission component of VMR-1, which is stationed at MCAS Cherry Point. We are honored to represent MCAS, Cherry Point, Camp Lejeune and MCAS, New River. As you know, we are keenly interested in ensuring that the missions and capabilities of MCAS Cherry Point support and enhance the Marine Corps and the surrounding community. As a Marine who served aboard MCAS Cherry Point, you truly understand the strong and positive relationship the Marine Corps has with my district.

One of the most important connections between the community and the Marine Corps is the SAR component of VMR-1. Pedro, as the MCAS Cherry Point SAR squadron is affectionately known, has served the Marine Corps needs well and has been a source of community goodwill for decades. Pedro is an important part of the Marine Corps presence in our region and is greatly valued by our local citizens. Without Pedro, Marine pilots and crews risk delayed rescue that could exacerbate serious injury or even lead to death. The community benefits when Pedro assists in civilian SAR and emergency medical transport as part of the constant training required of a top-notch SAR team.

We have learned that on page 2.6.17 of the 2015 Marine Aviation Plan, there is a brief description of a major change in Marine Corps SAR capabilities. This page states, without any details or explanation, that "Marine aviation will divest from the dedicated SAR mission at MCAS, Cherry Point and MCAS, Yuma." The plan seems to push MCAS, Cherry Point "maritime SAR" on the Coast Guard. This change in Marine Aviation mission raises serious questions that need to be addressed and, if not satisfactorily answered, must result in a re-evaluation of the plan. The questions of most concern to us at this time are:

1. **Is the Coast Guard ready and able to provide the same SAR coverage provided by Pedro?** The ability to rescue Marines and train for SAR must not be undervalued. What data do you have that projects the Coast Guard's response times for maritime rescues by helicopter? Are there any areas currently covered by Pedro that will see a reduced response time? Are there any areas currently covered by Pedro that will be left without helicopter SAR capabilities? What studies have been conducted to evaluate Coast Guard SAR response times to an over-ocean ejection at each of the training flight distances south and west of MCAS Cherry Point? Please provide any meeting minutes/decision paper of the discussion that has taken place with the Coast Guard and the Marine Corps on this issue. Please provide the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that has been drawn up between the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard.

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2. **What is the plan for non-maritime SAR?** How can you ensure the same level of on-land responsiveness currently expected from Pedro? We are very concerned that the 2015 Aviation Plan description excludes consideration of how this change will impact SAR over the vast on-land training ranges used by the Marine Corps.

3. **What plans do you have to ensure that SAR abilities are not compromised during a transition to Coast Guard coverage?**

4. **It is generally assumed that standing down VMR-1 is a fiscally-driven initiative.** Is that assumption correct? If adequate funding could be provided by the Congress, or elsewhere, would the Marine Corps desire to keep this capability?

5. **What are the cost benefits to the Marine Corps of divesting SAR at MCAS Cherry Point?** If retained, what would be annual cost of ongoing SAR at MCAS Cherry Point?

6. **What are the costs to the Coast Guard to adding SAR coverage for MCAS Cherry Point?**

7. **How will on-land SAR be covered and paid for?**

8. **What were the plans to continue VMR-1's SAR mission? Why were they not pursued?** Presumably there were plans to continue SAR at MCAS Cherry Point before the 2015 Aviation Plan was written; there is no mention of the mission change in the prior Aviation Plan. For example, the HH-46E is a legacy aircraft, but one that can be flown for many years and maintained at FRC East and, after that, can be replaced with other airframes appropriate for the SAR mission. Prior to the finalization of the 2015 Aviation Plan, what SAR options did you consider?

9. **Are the skills gained by VMR-1's Pedro-assigned air crews beneficial to them as they move to new assignments?** Are there other training opportunities that will be lost if Marine Aviation divests SAR at MCAS Cherry Point?

These are critically important questions. We believe that each must be answered satisfactorily before MCAS, Cherry Point's SAR capabilities are divested. Thank you for your personal attention to this very important matter. We are greatly looking forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Thom Tillis
U. S. Senator

Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress

Cc: Chair of the Senate Airland Subcommittee, Chair of the House Tactical Air and Land Subcommittee, Commandant of the Marine Corps, Commandant of the Coast Guard, and the Deputy Commandant of the Marine Corps for Aviation