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**TO:** Members of the Lower North Fork Wildfire Commission

**FROM:** James H. Davis, Executive Director, Colorado Department of Public Safety

**DATE:** Friday, September 21, 2012

**SUBJECT:** Possible Commission Recommendation concerning continuous spending authority for DOC SWIFT crews.

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An issue has come to my attention recently that I would like to suggest the Commission include as a recommendation in its final report. This recommendation would be from the Commission to the Joint Budget Committee that continuous spending authority be given to Colorado Correctional Industries (CCI) within the Department of Corrections (DOC) to outfit and administer State Wildland Inmate Fire Team (SWIFT) crews. The spending authority for SWIFT crews is offset by cash proceeds the state receives from local, regional, state, and federal agencies. Colorado's wildland fire activity has been widely variable over the last several years. Continuous spending authority for the SWIFT crews would enhance the state's ability to more quickly and effectively respond and react to wildland fires. We have heard from many wildfire stakeholders during the course of the summer and while we unfortunately likely won't have time for additional presentations on this topic, I believe this issue is important to wildfire suppression efforts in the state and worth the Commission's consideration.

#### **Background:**

Following the 2000 Fire Season, CCI began forming a wildland fire team to provide crew support and assistance on wildland fires within Colorado. CCI operates the SWIFT crews which are housed at various correctional facilities in Colorado.

The SWIFT program officially began in 2002 with a single crew and grew to three crews by 2004. CCI has since added full time fuels and trail construction crews that supplement the program as well. These crews are particularly active in the mitigation and removal of trees impacted by the pine and spruce beetle epidemic. One of the SWIFT crews' largest advantages operationally is that they can provide for at least one crew on a year-round basis while most crews are available only between May and October. Early season fires, such as the Lower

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North Fork incident, are becoming more typical in Colorado and the SWIFT crews are the primary resource for those incidents until the Federal crews are activated in late Spring. Comparing the costs of SWIFT crews to a similarly-typed Federal or private crew saves the taxpayers of Colorado almost \$5,000 per crew a day.

The SWIFT crews are self-sufficient and come with supervisors, basic tools and equipment, and transportation. To ensure that the crews function well, the personnel train together and are maintained as crews throughout the year. They are available year-round for assistance with non-fire, woods-related programs and projects. Each crew generally consists of about 20 men. Training a crew typically takes up to three weeks, but can be done faster in smaller groups. The DOC generally trains each crews once annually in the spring, with a target date for availability for assignment on March 1<sup>st</sup>.

**Issue:**

At the current time, spending authority for CCI is extremely tight, particularly in the areas of operating expenses and inmate pay which are heavily impacted by the SWIFT program. As such, adding additional crews can be difficult because spending decisions within CCI must generally be made by considering the viability of the program to business models of other programs that might be competing for the same spending authority. Further, CCI must evaluate how each of its six separate lines of spending authority would be impacted. With continuous spending authority for SWIFT crews, decisions to expand or contract the number and activity of crews would be based on community needs both temporary and long-term, rather than on the availability of TABOR-exempt spending authority.

The recent drought, extreme heat, and a destructive and deadly wildland fire season have brought renewed attention to the significant resources required to respond to the state's often unpredictable fire demand. As the Lower North Fork Wildfire Commission considers ways to make the state safer, a recommendation may be warranted to express support for continuous spending authority for the DOC's SWIFT program.