

Monthly Message from the Chief

February 2010

I recall learning in grade school how governments were formed and thinking how sensible the concept of checks and balances seemed. The purpose was, and still is, to prevent too much power from resting in the hands of a single person. Separation of powers is a model for the governance of democratic states and was first developed in ancient Greece. It later came into widespread use by the Roman Republic and has since been adopted by many democratic societies.



When I was learning this, it never occurred to me that I would someday personally be part of the process, but I have recently.

Being Director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection begins with an appointment by the Governor (executive branch). In my case, that occurred on February 17, 2009. But to remain as Director requires Senate (legislative branch) confirmation within a year. After a public hearing, the Senate Rules Committee recommended my confirmation to the full Senate on February 10, 2010, where it was approved by unanimous vote the following day.

It's a sound process, and I learned a number of things as it unfolded. Beside the primary purpose as explained above, it was an opportunity for me to learn what issues are of importance to our lawmakers. I will share some of them with you here.

The structure of our department has been a point of contention during my career and was called into question as part of the confirmation proceedings. The vast majority of our budget is obligated to fire protection, yet we have a very real and important part to play in maintaining the health of forest, range and watershed resources in this state. I favor maintaining the current structure of CAL FIRE.

The following paragraphs are from my written statements regarding this essential issue:

"I strongly believe that achieving CAL FIRE's resource management stewardship goals are crucial to meeting the Department's fire protection and prevention mission. Changes in climate are influencing the condition of California's rich and diverse forest, woodland and range ecosystems--their vulnerability to natural disturbances that weaken their health is of significant concern. The continued strength of CAL FIRE's resource management programs is fundamental to the Department's total force response."

“CAL FIRE employs a total force concept, which embodies the philosophy that all members of an organization are vital to its success, committed to its success and will contribute to its success in concert. Many would have us be just the state’s fire department, but I believe we are more than a fire department. We are many fire departments, a resource protection force and more than the sum of our parts. Much of our effectiveness in mitigating emergency incidents of all sizes and types is the comprehensive and complementary nature of the department, which benefits from a depth of knowledge and proficiencies in varied disciplines united by common training, terminology, communication and organization.”

Many of you have heard these statements before, but they bear repeating, as I believe these expressed philosophies comprise the core of our mission.

Defensible space inspections are of continued interest. I was pleased to report the increased numbers of inspections we have been able to provide and expect continued improvement of our prevention efforts.

The Board of Forestry and Fire Protection recently passed a regulation package intended to enhance protections for salmon and other aquatic species. Members of the Senate Rules Committee wanted to know how we will enforce these rules and provide adequate monitoring to ensure the rules are having the intended effects. This gave me the opportunity to describe the procedures we have employed and will continue to employ to gauge the effects of regulated timber harvest on our environment.

There was also great interest in our Cooperative Fire Protection Program practices. Specifically, there was concern that we are not being fully reimbursed for the fire protection services we provide local government by contract. The perception was pervasive enough that the Senate Rules Committee requested a review of our “Schedule A” program accounting practices. I look forward to this review and welcome the opportunity to share how we conduct our cooperative fire protection business.

I was also pleased that the issue of succession surfaced. It allowed me to reveal that the measures taken to address salary compaction and inversion in the fire protection classes were marginally successful, but not sufficient to maintain long-term interest in supervisorial or managerial positions. I have recently broached this subject with the Director of the Department of Personnel Administration. I’ll continue to seek solutions that encourage those with leadership aptitude to seek promotion.

I truly appreciate the effort my executive team has provided in preparation for my confirmation and the good wishes and words of encouragement and support I have received from so many of you.

I couldn’t have done it without you!

It's a personal relief for me to have cleared the hurdle of confirmation. I've enjoyed being the Director of this department much more than I imagined. I look forward to working with the men and women of CAL FIRE and our cooperators in order to meet our mission with a focus on the future. My intent is to serve Governor Schwarzenegger throughout the remainder of his administration and continue into the next one in order to provide continuity of public service during a time of transition.