

Monthly Message from the Chief

November 2010

In June of 1971, when I first reported for duty as a seasonal firefighter in King City, I had no idea that I had begun a career, much less that I would close out that career as Director of one of the finest public safety and resource protection departments in the world.

Last month I made it known that I would retire this year, and during the month of October I spent much more time considering the future of CAL FIRE than reminiscing. Therefore, I am taking the opportunity in my last message as Chief to convey topics I think are of great importance to the future of CAL FIRE.



- **Cooperative Fire Protection Agreements** - Maintain a sound perspective regarding cooperative fire protection agreements. Our cooperative fire protection contracts are of immense benefit to the people of this state. This program provides values that are often lost in the controversies focused on how much we charge, recovering our costs and labor issues. Our stance needs to remain firm; conduct business in a transparent, consistent manner and employ defensible methodologies for accepting/renewing contracts and ensuring that we are adequately reimbursed for the services we provide. The comprehensive, integrated services that CAL FIRE provides are essential to the success of California's mutual aid system, particularly when extraordinary emergency events occur.
- **Relationship with the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection** – During my tenure, I feel the Department completed several significant accomplishments in cooperation with the Board. I believe the groundwork is in place to continue and improve on that cooperation.
- **Relationship with our federal partners** – California's fire protection responsibility is roughly divided into thirds: one third of the state is designated as Federal Responsibility Area, one third as State Responsibility Area, and one third as Local Government Responsibility Area. It's important to foster a strong relationship with our federal partners, regardless of our sometimes divergent fire control objectives. Understanding their policies, and ensuring ours are understood, as well, is critical. We must also assert our voice in the management policies of the federally managed lands in this state.
- **Involvement in local, state, national and international emergency and resource management efforts** – Our collective experience in managing large and complex emergency incidents and protecting natural resources in a changing environment is of great value locally and globally. We need to remain engaged!
- **Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) integration** – Much progress has been made to integrate the services provided by the OSFM into CAL FIRE, but I believe there are still efficiencies to be realized by integrating those services down to the unit level.

- **Relationship with the Governor's Office** – Governor Schwarzenegger has been very supportive of public safety and CAL FIRE. I hope my successor will have the good fortune to enjoy a similar relationship with the incoming administration. I encourage the department's leadership to take a proactive approach in building a rapport with the new governor and their staff.
- **Relationships with legislators** – It is imperative we reinvigorate the Key Contact Program which is intended to empower unit staff to engage legislators, and pursue opportunities for the Director and Headquarters staff to meet with legislators. Maintaining open lines of communication is essential in providing the protection outlined in our mission statement to the citizens of the state of California.
- **Relationship with labor** – It's important to sustain the relationship between the department and CDF Firefighters. By minimizing our differences and maximizing our common areas of concern, we have been able to focus on accomplishing the department's mission. Mutual respect and having to agree to disagree on some issues have been key to maintaining productive interaction.
- **Grant coordination** – Our department needs to have a coordinated approach to grant acquisition and administration. A grants unit needs to be developed within the department that coordinates the availability, pursuit and administration of grants
- **Maintain strong centralized policy and decentralized decision-making** - Each of our Unit Chiefs have responsibilities tantamount to any other large fire department chief in this country. In fact, many of them bear the responsibilities of multiple fire chiefs. The Region Chiefs should be the guardians of how we operate. In coordination with our program managers, they must insist on compliance with policy; policy which they must have a voice in establishing or changing.
- **Employee Input** - Every employee of CAL FIRE should be allowed an avenue to bring about change. I encourage anyone with an idea to work through your chain of command and bring it to the newly formed Management Council. Every rank has the ability to contribute to the direction of our department.
- **Fire Protection Resource Allocation** - Last, but certainly not least, we need to take a fresh look at the way we allocate our fire protection resources in California. The complexities of this state have changed, as have the challenges of serving and safeguarding the people and protecting the property and natural resources of this state. A comprehensive review of our capabilities is overdue.

This list is in no way comprehensive or in order of priority, rather it's intended as a message to the future leaders of CAL FIRE who are tasked with taking this department forward.

Change is inevitable and we all must be prepared to adapt. Last month I shared with you my wife's declining health, which coupled with the vagaries that accompany change, mean that today is my last day as an employee of the State of California. Tomorrow I will be retired.

There may have been a day I didn't want to come to work, but I can't remember that day. That includes this morning. What makes today different is that I will be driving home from work for the last time, and have chosen to do so in my work uniform; a uniform that I have worn proudly for nearly 40 years.

I can't begin to express my gratitude to all who have supported me. It has been very fulfilling to work with the teams with which I have been blessed. That is the primary reason I can go on to another chapter of my life knowing I leave CAL FIRE in good hands.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Del Walters". The signature is stylized and somewhat cursive.

Del Walters
Director