

Monthly Message from the Chief

September 2009

August continued to be a very dynamic and demanding month for fire activity. The number of lightning ignitions declined, but the very hot, dry weather we experienced statewide together with fuel conditions that reached record levels and human-caused starts kept all of us extraordinarily busy. The focus shifted from Northern California, through the central part of the state, to Southern California. The predictive services forecast of spring has proven to be quite accurate.



Today, even with the availability of near real-time global information, it's human nature to focus on those things that directly affect us. It also seems that because of the ever-increasing flow of input we receive, we tend to focus on recent events. Given that, I am still surprised at how often I have heard in the last few weeks the perception that "fire season" has finally started. As of September 6, CAL FIRE firefighters have responded to 1,684 more fires in the state and local areas we protect than at this time last year, but 317,558 fewer acres of those lands have burned. If federal numbers are added, the totals are even more dramatic: 1,712 more fires and 872,612 fewer acres in California.

In truth, a good part of this dichotomy is due to the many lightning fires that occurred during a 24-hour period last year that became large, but I do believe that four-person staffing is paying off. The Executive Order that Governor Schwarzenegger signed in May allowed this increased staffing and gave us the ability to adapt to conditions affecting fire occurrence and behavior. Maintaining a strong initial attack capability is money well spent! The cost per hour of initial attack firefighting is a fraction of what it costs once a fire becomes a major event.

There will always be those times; however, when fires escape our initial attempts to contain them. When they do, we are very fortunate to have access to our Emergency Fund that may only be tapped by CAL FIRE for wildfires. Given the economic crisis that persists in California, it is incumbent on all of us to be prudent in our use of the Emergency Fund, and

continuously seek efficiencies in the way we do business. So far this year we have spent approximately \$123 million of the \$182 million allocated for the Emergency Fund. Don't be surprised if you see management reviews of large fires this fall focusing on the effectiveness and efficiency of our operations.

When responding to other major emergencies, such as floods, landslides or earthquakes, we don't have such a fund to draw upon. All agencies that participate in these types of emergencies do so by expending funds that were budgeted to deal with initial attack operations only and hope that other state and federal funds will be approved for partial reimbursement.

This week, there will be a concerted effort to support the Governor's proposed Emergency Response Initiative (ERI) before the legislature adjourns for the year. For CAL FIRE it means having a permanent and reliable funding source for the fourth firefighter on each engine, a dedicated military coordinator, replacement of our inadequate and increasingly unstable wide area network that supports a multitude of command and control programs we rely upon to dispatch and coordinate emergency response resources, automated flight following and vehicle location and the replacement of our aging helicopter fleet. For Cal EMA it means increasing the number of engines that can be placed in the hands of local government firefighters for all types of emergencies. For the California National Guard it means adding to their Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) inventory and the availability of more fire fighting helicopters. For local government it means maintaining the ability to contribute to California's Mutual Aid System in the face of these austere fiscal times. For all of us it means the development of a fund that may be used for all types of emergencies, regardless of where they occur in California.

Given the four seasons in California of fire, flood, earthquake and mudslide, consider what might happen in those areas affected by the Jesusita Fire in Santa Barbara County or the Station Fire in Los Angeles County, should the current El Niño condition strengthen and persist through fall and winter as predicted by the National Weather Service. We have seen the repercussions of storms associated with El Niño conditions before. Fire agencies will be deeply involved, including CAL FIRE and our inmate fire crews. In fact, I was briefed today on a series of eight preparatory meetings being held statewide involving all those who would be involved in the response to such emergencies.

The ability to swiftly mitigate the affects of these types of emergencies is contingent upon having the fiscal support immediately available. That's what makes the Emergency Response Initiative so important not only to us, but to all Californians whose lives and property we protect.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Del Walters", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Del Walters, Chief
Director