

Message from the Chief

Chief's Memo – May 30, 2007

CAL FIRE Releases Report of Esperanza “Burnover” Accident Investigation

I spent all of last week in Southern California. During the week, I met with the City of San Diego Fire Chief Tracy Jarman to discuss fire risk and other issues in the San Diego area, received a briefing on the status of the Hemet Ryan Air Attack Base capital improvement project, formed a CAL FIRE Committee to look at international donations of surplus fire equipment, visited staff and toured Rainbow Conservation Camp, and held a press conference in Yucaipa with the USFS Chief Forester Gail Kimbell to release the report of our joint investigation of the USFS Engine 57 Burnover at the Esperanza fire last year.



First, and foremost, the purpose of the Esperanza investigation and report released is to focus only on safety issues that will help protect firefighters in the future. Our agencies regularly conduct these types of investigations and generate reports to provide “lessons learned” anytime there is an “accident or near miss.” Our investigation centered on the safety aspect of what happened. The entire report is available by clicking on the image below:



The purpose of the report is not to assess blame. We do not include the names of the victims or the witnesses in the report. It is my hope that safety always remains the highest priority among all firefighters. Over 15,000 hours of investigation created this report. The facts in this report speak for themselves.

It is NOT the purpose of this report to address issues which are the responsibility of other agencies, such as, the Office of Inspector General, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or the Riverside County District Attorney's Office. The purpose and focus of our investigation and report is EXCLUSIVELY the future safety of firefighters.

While this fire was in State Responsibility Area (SRA), a joint team from CAL FIRE and the U.S. Forest Service was established the day of the Engine 57 burnover to begin the accident review. Because of the impact to USFS

employees, we felt their participation in the accident review was vital to firefighter safety.

The first meeting of the joint team occurred on Friday, October 27, 2006. This team spent the next two weeks working round the clock, at the scene of the accident, interviewing firefighters and members of the public, analyzing data, equipment, personal protective gear, and more. The team also had follow up meetings to discuss their findings and to develop a timeline of activities. After listing all the facts, and building the timeline, they then carefully analyzed the total fire picture and developed the causal and contributing factors which led to this tragedy:

a. Causal Factors are...any behavior, omission, or deficiency that if corrected, eliminated, or avoided probably would have prevented the fatality.

b. Contributing Factors...are any behavior, omission, or deficiency that sets the stage for an accident, or increases the severity of injuries.

The “Causal Factors and Contributing Factors” contained in this report will now be shared throughout the fire community in hopes that we can all learn from and prevent future accidents of this type.

Unrelated to the specifics of the Esperanza Investigation and Report, but generally speaking, my experience is that the leadership of CAL FIRE makes sound tactical and firefighting decisions based on conditions and information available. Because complex wildfire conditions change rapidly, ours is often a dangerous occupation. One of the best things about our profession is that firefighters are heroic individuals who have a “get it done” attitude. This may also work against us at times. But, we must continue to make the best decisions available based on training, experience, sound judgment.

Organizationally, we are not changing strategies. We will continue to engage in “structure protection,” defending the lives and homes of the people we are sworn to protect. However, the people we protect also have an obligation to help us save them, and their property, by providing “defensible” or “survivable” space around their homes and other structures. Based on conditions and resources available, experienced company officers and strike team leaders will, out of necessity, decide to protect only those homes that are defensible and survivable and utilize their limited resources in the most efficient and effective manner. This may result in lost structures which are not defensible. This is an acceptable firefighting strategy. Our firefighting culture, at every level, as well as the people we serve, must come to this understanding.

Hindsight is always 20/20. And, there will always be those “experts” who want to second guess every decision. Generally speaking, as the director of CAL FIRE, I want to inform personnel in command positions of my view that decisions made,

and actions taken, within the scope of duty and within your training warrant legal defense, if necessary, by your employer.

The department's safety officer is preparing for the IAFC/IAFF Safety Stand Down scheduled for June 17-23. The theme this year is "Ready to Respond." We will focus on "Situational Awareness," proper training, preparation and equipage before a call, and promoting the idea that all members can respond to, work and return home safely from the emergency they are called to mitigate.

On other subjects, my meeting with Chief Jarman in San Diego went very well. She has been supportive of CAL FIRE on a number of issues in the recent past, including use of the DC-10, State Fire Training issues, and other cooperative ventures. I updated her on the status of the Governor's Executive Order, release of the Esperanza Report, the contracting process and planned use of the DC-10, and other fire season issues.



Progress is going well on the plans for the capital improvement projects at the Ryan Air Attack Base in Hemet, CA. I met in San Diego with staff from the Riverside Unit HQ, the Ryan AAB, and Sacramento for a briefing. Things appear to be on track. The plans look like the future holds a facility we will all be proud of.

The 50th Anniversary of the Ramona Air Attack Base will be held on Saturday, June 23, 2007 and Sunday, June 24, 2007. I will be attending and encourage CAL FIRE Units and personnel to participate in this great event.

While in San Diego, I appointed a CAL FIRE Committee to develop a strategy for making contributions of surplus equipment to other countries. A number of CAL FIRE Units have been engaged in doing this for a number of years. The committee will be developing a charter and looking for other members. Contact [Southern Asst. Region Chief Chuck Maner](#) if you are interested in being involved.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff from Rainbow Conservation Camp for a great tour of that facility. There is a lot of work going on to keep the oldest Camp in our system up and in good conditions. Work is going on the waste water treatment system, re-roofing of the buildings continues, and a new food storage area is under construction.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Grijalva'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ruben Grijalva, Chief
Director