

Message from the Chief

Chief's Memo – November 24, 2007

A Time of Thanks - An Effective Effort in Fighting Fires



I want to begin this message by thanking each and every one of you for your service and dedication to the people of California. Having just spent a precious few days at home with my family at Thanksgiving and contemplating the events of the past month, I cannot begin to think of the words to thank you enough for all you have done. At Thanksgiving a mere “thanks” seems so inadequate.

I know that many of you have not seen much of your family during this past month. I am grateful to them and to you for your dedication to Cal Fire, to each other, and to the people we are sworn to protect and serve. There truly is no other profession like ours. The “total workforce” of Cal Fire stepped up during this time of crisis for California and delivered.

I am also grateful to all of our sister state agencies for their significant roles in managing the response, to the thousands of volunteers and hundreds of organizations who lent a caring hand, to our brethren in law enforcement who saved lives during the evacuations, as well as our federal and local partners who were with us “side by side” in the battle against the Southern California Wildfires. Finally, I am grateful to Governor Schwarzenegger for his leadership, his support, and for his understanding of the complexities of large scale disasters.

Most people are also grateful to all of you for your heroic actions and your caring hearts. I am extremely proud of all of you, as is Governor Schwarzenegger.

However, a few have chosen to be critical of limited aspects of the emergency response. While some of the criticisms stem from incomplete or inaccurate information, others stem from a need for better education on tactics, strategy, and safety, the incident command system, the mutual aid system, and large scale disaster management. Nonetheless, we will accept and evaluate all criticisms with the spirit intended, “to improve service to the public,” which is a common goal for all of us. We will work internally and externally toward that common goal.

Where inaccuracies or clarification is necessary, we will respond in a manner that reflects our values of professionalism, honor, and dignity. Below is an Opinion

Editorial piece that was printed in the San Diego Union Tribune on November 23, 2007:

An Effective Effort in Fighting Fires

By Ruben Grijalva

Saving lives is always the first priority of firefighters in responding to wildfires. During the recent fires, effective coordination between federal, state and local emergency authorities saved lives through the safe evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people. At the same time, no emergency responder lives were lost in the extremely dangerous conditions.

In Southern California, the recent actions taken by all emergency responders resulted in dramatic improvements since the 2003 fires. This year, in addition to the most publicized fires, another 251 fires were put out and held without damage due to aggressive tactics during the Santa Ana winds event.

Fires are fought and won on the ground. Air coverage is an important tool, but, by continuing to solely focus on that aspect, it diminishes the role of the 15,000 firefighters and their heroic efforts. More than 130 firefighters were injured, including four who were hospitalized in the intensive care unit with major burns while saving lives and protecting structures during extreme fire conditions.

When the recent fires hit, every aircraft that could safely be flown was launched. Cal Fire aircraft alone flew more than 800 hours and dropped 1.15 million gallons of retardant. The U.S. Forest Service and its contractors also flew as safety permitted.

What some are referring to as “time lost” wrongly assumes that 100 percent of time can be spent flying when in reality, there must also be time allotted for refueling and refilling water and retardant and maintaining pilot safety levels by making sure that we have alert, informed and mission-ready crews before queuing up and flying again.

This year as the threat of fire season diminished in Northern California and increased in Southern California due to the Santa Ana winds, air tankers were shifted to bases in the south, including Hemet/Ryan, Ramona and Porterville. Following a red-flag warning from the National Weather Service, Cal Fire moved resources from the north to the south as they became available. By Wednesday, Oct. 17, both Ramona and Hemet/Ryan had three tankers ready to fly at each base. On Sunday, Oct. 21, the Canyon fire in Malibu started at 4:55 a.m. Cal Fire launched an air tactical aircraft and four tankers to this fire at 8:44 a.m. It wasn't long before 11 fires became major ones within a 16-hour period. During that time, Cal Fire flew a total of 80 hours on these fires. To address confusion over why some aircraft were able to fly during this 16-hour period when winds were extremely high in certain areas, the following is a timeline of events:

On Sunday near Ramona – where the Witch and Harris fires were burning – the wind speeds in the area were in the 50 mph to 60 mph range, and the gust speeds were more than 20 mph above the sustained winds. This severely hampered the aerial attack. The Harris fire started at 9:30 a.m., and an air attack plane was in the air by 9:41 a.m. followed by the first air tanker at 10:09 a.m.

Unfortunately, by 12:30 p.m., the wind and turbulence were so great that fixed wing air operations were shut down.

When the Witch fire began on Sunday at 12:35 p.m., the first air tanker, Tanker 70 out of Ramona, dropped at 12:40 p.m. – five minutes after it was reported. Extremely high wind and severe turbulence put a halt to flights on the Witch fire about 30 minutes later. Tanker 82 went back up at 5 p.m. and tried again, but was forced back to base due to winds. Flames were advancing at an acre per second amid 80-plus-mph wind gusts.

On the morning of Monday, Oct. 22, additional aircraft were sent south. The DC-10 at Victorville was activated, two DC-7s were requested from Oregon, and the Martin Mars Super Scooper was ordered from Canada. On Monday, another six fires broke out, and on Tuesday four more fires had started. Additional aircraft orders were placed, and air tankers, Air Attack OV-10s and helicopters were moved south to help in the fight.

By Tuesday evening, Cal Fire assets in the area included 17 tankers, nine air attacks and seven helicopters. At this time, aircraft had flown more than 393 hours helping fight the fires. Two helicopters and three air tankers were left on duty in northern bases to provide initial attack coverage.

This is a brief, preliminary overview but provides a picture of what we were up against on the air and on the ground.

Disaster response is a highly coordinated skill that takes years of experience and millions of dollars to put into place. Nowhere else in the world does it work as well as in California. Planes and helicopters are certainly important tools, but they are ineffective without firefighters, bulldozers and engines on the ground, an effective evacuation plan and properly managed shelters.

All of these components have one thing in common, and that is the safety of the public and our emergency response personnel. They must all work in tandem to achieve the maximum possible results. Gov. Schwarzenegger understands this, and he has increased Cal Fire's general fund budget for firefighting from \$309 million in 2003 to the current budget's \$568 million, a boost of \$259 million or about 84 percent. Cal Fire now has 336 engines, and we have invested \$26 million in 108 new engines to replace old trucks since 2003.

The response and performance in October was extraordinary. California managed the most orderly mass evacuation in history. People risked their lives over and over again. Many lives and thousands upon thousands of homes were saved.

Of course, improvements can and will be made. Together, we will conduct a thorough review, which the fire service does with all fires. We will improve where we need to improve. As the Santa Ana winds swirl in Southern California, federal, state and local officials remain vigilant and working together to protect all Californians.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Grijalva". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Ruben Grijalva, Chief
Director