

Directors Message March, 2015

As I am sure you have read, heard, or seen, there has been a lot of discussion about the Department in the news media over the last few weeks, with focus squarely on our Academy in Ione and the actions taken following the California Highway Patrol's recent investigation.

On March 4th, at our first Legislative budget hearing of the year, I took an opportunity to brief members on the actions that the Department has taken at the Academy, what we are doing to move forward in light of those actions, and what the Legislature can expect in the future.

Against a backdrop of speculation and supposition, it is important for me to share those comments with each of you. You all need to know where I stand and what my expectations are as we move forward. The text of my message to the Legislature follows:

I want to address the recent problems that we have had at our Academy in Ione. As we have briefed your staff, as a result of the allegations made during a murder inquiry involving one of our former employees, I requested an investigation by CHP into activities at the Academy. I requested their assistance not only because of the serious nature of the allegation, but because I did not know whether the outcome would be administrative or criminal, and so the review would be independent and impartial.

The Investigation:

- *A total of 123 Administrative Interrogations and 40 Investigative Interviews were held throughout the State.*
- *The bulk of the interviews were a sampling of students who attended the Academy over the last two years.*
- *The investigation also included the forensic analysis of State owned cellular phones, computers, and email accounts.*
- *The investigation took from May until December 2014.*
- *I have addressed these issues in the following ways:*
- *16 employees were identified for adverse action*
 - *One resigned*
 - *One retired*
 - *2 were fired*
 - *The remainder all received a demotion and some also received suspensions or additional reductions in pay.*



- *The State's law enforcement agency did not find sufficient evidence during this investigation to support any criminal misconduct charges. All the necessary elements of a crime needed for prosecution were not present.*
- *As the Director of this Department, you, and the public, expect me to thoroughly investigate allegations of this nature. You also expect me to take action, and to put in place the necessary measures to try to prevent this from happening again.*
- *As I take this action, it is my responsibility to ensure that the process as set forth by the State is followed. This is important not only to ensure fair due process to the employees involved, but also (even more critically) to protect the confidentiality of innocent witnesses who have come forward during this process. Unfortunately, with the recent media releases which included the names of witnesses, there is a fear by these witnesses of retaliation, not only by those involved, but by members of their own community.*
- *The disciplinary process for the employees is ongoing, and we are working to ensure the integrity of the outcomes is maintained.*

However, employee discipline is just the beginning of the steps being taken.

- *There is new management in place at the Academy in Ione. The individuals who have been chosen to fill these positions reflect my values and the values that you and our other stakeholders expect from a public safety agency.*
- *None of the disciplined employees remain at the Academy, and they are currently being replaced.*
- *The policies and procedures at the Academy are being updated and overhauled.*
- *The Academy Student Handbook, including the expected code of conduct, has been updated, and every student is required to review and acknowledge it.*
- *I have held a statewide managers meeting, as well as attended regional leadership meetings to address my expectations of our staff.*

I and my staff are grateful to you for your time and willingness to meet with us as these events have unfolded. As we move forward, I am happy to provide additional briefings on the steps we have taken to address the issues at our Academy.

CAL FIRE is an organization of over 7,000 men and women who are committed to public safety and the natural resources of this State. We ask these men and women to protect the people and resources of the State, often at great personal cost to them and their families. The actions of the small number of individuals at the Academy should not be allowed to detract from the overwhelming number of dedicated public servants in this Department. As you expect from me, I took action to quickly and thoroughly address the conduct of these individuals to allow CAL FIRE to move forward into the challenges that 2015 will present.

The episode at the Academy is a very clear example of how the behavior of a few employees can negatively impact the public perception of our organization as a whole. The behavior of these employees do not represent our values; we all have a responsibility to ensure we are demonstrating CAL FIRE's stated values each and every day. In the weeks and months ahead, we will continue to discuss this at all levels within the Department. In the short term, I would like each of us to take a fresh look at the following items:

- CAL FIRE's Mission, Vision and Values
- Employee Rules of Conduct
- Departmental Incompatible Activities Statement
- Equal Employment Opportunity policies

In the coming weeks, I will be asking that we all document our understanding of the principles in each of these items.

As I said in my remarks to the Legislature, I take issues such as these seriously, and we will continue to address them. By the same token, I know we are an organization that is relied upon every day because of our professionalism, skill level, and expertise in the mission we perform. Our focus must be to continue meeting that mission with the same dedication that we have historically shown.

Ken Pimlott
Director