Monthly Message from the Chief

April 2010

One of the most complex and dynamic programs in CAL FIRE is Cooperative Fire Protection. This program deals with all of our cooperative relationships among all levels of government, however in this message I will focus on the valued relationship we share with our local government (LG) partners.

Although we had contracts with counties going back to the early 1900s, it has been since 1945 that local government financial responsibilities were clearly defined, and local government entities such as cities, counties and districts have entered into cooperative agreements with CAL FIRE to provide many forms of emergency services. CAL FIRE provides fire protection services to many California citizens through the administration of 146 cooperative fire protection agreements in 35 of the State's 58 counties, 28 cities, 30 fire districts and 23 other special districts and service areas.

Below are additional statistics that illustrate the integration of these agreements into the greater fabric of CAL FIRE.

CAL FIRE budget (not including Emergency Fund) – $852,946,000
Amount of the budget reimbursed by LG agreements – $235,084,000 (27.56%)

CAL FIRE total number of permanent employees – 4,700
CAL FIRE permanent employees funded by LG agreements – 1,773 (37.72%)

CAL FIRE state-funded stations – 228
LG funded stations administered by CAL FIRE – 575

CAL FIRE state-funded engines – 336
LG funded engines administered by CAL FIRE – 759

LG funded volunteer firefighters – 5,600
LG funded truck companies administered by CAL FIRE – 38
LG funded rescues administered by CAL FIRE – 215
LG funded paramedic units administered by CAL FIRE – 63
LG funded hazardous materials units administered by CAL FIRE – 12

This list of resources is intended to give one an idea of the size and complexity of the emergency response force CAL FIRE administers, and it is not all-inclusive.

Now, let's explore some of the rationale behind the agreements.

Our policy states, "The department will maintain cooperative fire protection contracts and agreements where there are economic and social benefits to the people of the state." Any agreement we enter into or maintain should always enhance the public service provided by both parties and benefit the taxpayers; those to whom we are ultimately responsible.

California's Public Resources Code Section 4142 enables the department, with the approval of the Department of General Services, to enter into cooperative agreements "…upon the terms and under the conditions as it deems wise..." To deem an agreement "wise," an analysis must be completed to determine if it's a good fit for CAL FIRE. Additionally, the State Administrative Manual (SAM) contains language requiring us to recoup the complete cost of providing services associated with such agreements. These two requirements should always be kept in mind when considering the appropriateness of a cooperative agreement.

The category of "Depth and Flexibility" is weighted higher in the analysis than any other factor. Having more fire protection employees sharing common standards of policy, training and communication strengthens our abilities to provide comprehensive emergency services statewide. Conversely, that same strength benefits those with whom we contract within their areas of responsibility. The majority of our tenured firefighters have experience in both state and local government fire protection operations, allowing them to operate in either environment.

The relationship must complement our department's mission. The second highest weighting is given to the factor of "Initial Attack on SRA," or State Responsibility Area; the 31 million acres of California we are statutorily responsible for protecting. The highest rating in this category is given to those cooperators who can contribute 25% or more of their resources to initial attack on SRA. I believe this is fair considering the extent to which state-funded resources are more readily available to those with whom we contract, primarily due to shared command and control of resources.

There are many more factors that require consideration, and those may be found in the 8500 sections of our policy dedicated to Cooperative Fire Protection. They include ensuring that proper support is provided. Behind every front-line emergency service provider is a support network addressing such needs as administration, human resources, labor relations, finance, budgeting, information technology, civil rights, accountability, legal, training, engineering, information and education, fire prevention, code and law enforcement, mobile equipment, materials management, telecommunications and technical services.

Because I am very proud of this department and believe we offer extremely high value for the dollar when it comes to full-service fire protection, I believe we should welcome governing boards of the entities with which we contract evaluating our services. It's wise for them to periodically ensure their constituents are effectively and economically protected. In fact, we should encourage it.

In these trying economic times, many of our partners are assessing their public safety level-of-service needs and their abilities to fund them. At the same time, at least as many local government bodies are looking to CAL FIRE as a potential solution to meet their fire service needs. I am committed to maintaining an open, honest dialogue with our partners and potential partners regarding these issues in the true spirit of our Cooperative Fire Protection Program.

Bottom line: Any cooperative agreement we enter into must benefit the people of California. We want to help those who can benefit from our help, but it has to make sense both operationally and fiscally.