Monthly Message from the Chief

August 2009

It's Sunday morning, August 2, 2009, as I begin this message. I turned on my home computer first thing this morning and checked the lightning map for the previous 24 hours. Having been concerned about the number of seemingly dry strikes that had occurred the day before and knowing of the ensuing fire activity, I was even more concerned by what appeared on a National Weather Service visible satellite loop. It was a line of clouds stretching from Tahoe into Oregon where weather from the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico met.

I was reminded of my first year as an engineer. On the night of August 1, 1977, I was off-shift on a boat on Lake San Antonio in Southern Monterey County. An intense lightning storm caused us to head for shore. Knowing the inevitable outcome, I returned home to several messages ordering me to return to work. At that time, I didn't realize I wouldn't get back home until September.

I recall thinking that at nearly 178,000 acres there would never be any fire bigger than the Marble-Cone Fire in the course of my career. I was obviously and sadly mistaken. Although it still ranks #5, 10 of the 20 largest fires in our state's recorded history have occurred since the turn of the century, and three of those were bigger. (This information is available in the fact sheets found in the Communications section of our internet website: http://www.fire.ca.gov/.)

Although the focus of my attention was then the Marble-Cone Fire, I was aware of the many timber fires in the northeastern part of the state. Fire names like Scarface, Pondosa and Hors Corners come to mind. Those memories flashed as I compared the pattern of Saturday's lightning with the line of clouds, which produced more lightning and more fires later in the day. The result was thousands of acres of California timber ablaze, and it's still burning.

When I first became Director earlier this year, I was frequently quizzed about the single biggest problem facing CAL FIRE. I initially said it was the economy and how it affected our budget, which in turn affects how we provide service to the residents of California and those who visit us. It wasn't long into my tenure that I changed my response. While the economy definitely has been and continues to be an impact, it's climate change that will provide the greatest long-term challenge to our department.

The cause of the change is debatable, but it's pretty hard to deny something is going on. Recent studies regarding climate change repeat common themes:

- Wildfires will become more numerous, intense and damaging.

- Instances of severe weather will increase.
- The seas will rise.
- Global economies will be affected.

All of these are happening.

CAL FIRE has a key role in how California adapts to the changing conditions we are experiencing. All of our programs have a part to play. Maintaining the vigor of our forests and watersheds, land use planning, improving ignition resistant building construction standards, continuously assessing the impacts of the change and maintaining a strong emergency response capability are all essential elements of what we have to offer.

I usually write these messages over the course of several days, and this one is no exception. Today is Wednesday, August 5, 2009. Earlier today, along with Northern Region Chief Bill Hoehman, I visited the lightning fires in eastern Shasta County. It was gratifying to hear almost everyone we spoke with comment on their concern for a predicted change in the weather and how it might affect the fires.

As we returned to the valley floor, we witnessed what happened when an unusually strong low pressure system approached from the Pacific. The wind changed direction and increased in velocity. This caused the Goose Fire burning in timber northwest of Burney to rapidly increase in intensity. However, due to the awareness of the impending change in the weather, no one was injured.

This picture was taken from over 40 miles away shortly after the wind surfaced:

Within an hour of this happening, I was back on the computer. Over 450 lightning strikes spawned by the advancing front had been recorded in our Coast Range from the Oregon border to southern Tehama County. The lightning continues, new fires have been reported, and, as happens with lightning, they will continue to be discovered for days.

The bottom line here is that weather behavior once considered unusual may well become the norm. In order to stay safe while being effective, we must maintain an extraordinarily high level of situational awareness by utilizing not only our natural senses, but our training and all resources at our disposal. Technology that depicts weather elements, geography, fire behavior, hazards, improvements and resource status continues to improve, and it must be put into the hands of those making decisions on emergency incidents in order to make a difference.

Perhaps the most important responsibility of the CAL FIRE executive team is to ensure the people of our department have the tools necessary to serve and safeguard the people and protect the property and resources of California. I take that responsibility seriously and will continue to seek out and seize opportunities to procure and maintain those tools.