

California firefighters and fire chiefs rally for expanded mutual aid funding

KCRA News
Nazy Javid
May 9, 2018

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Fire chiefs and firefighters – representing tens of thousands of firefighters from every corner of California – joined local elected officials, community leaders and lawmakers Wednesday to call on the Legislature and Governor to increase funding to protect North State communities from the rising threats of natural disasters in “California’s New Normal.”

“Our Mutual Aid resources are over-stressed. In the last six years, the number of annual requests for assistance that go ‘unfilled’ has skyrocketed from 300 to 11,000 – 30 percent of all requests. We need to strengthen and modernize our Mutual Aid System into a proactive system that can fight fires and other disasters in the first hour by pre-positioning firefighters and equipment where high risks are predicted,” said Mark Hartwig, fire chief for San Bernardino County Fire and president of the California Fire Chiefs Association.

North Coast Sen. Mike McGuire said the desperately needed funding would be invested in California's severely strained firefighting mutual aid and dispatch systems for both local fire departments and Cal Fire.

“Cal Fire appreciates Sen. McGuire bringing together firefighters from throughout the state to work collaboratively on planning for disasters in this New Normal,” said Cliff Allen, president of Cal Fire Local 2881.

The coalition was represented by the California Professional Firefighters, Cal Fire firefighters Local 2881, California Fire Chiefs, California Fire Districts Association, California State Firefighters' Association, California League of Cities, Rural County Representatives of California and the California Special Districts Association.

The two funding requests are expected to modernize California's firefighting service to combat the state's new normal. McGuire said the following investment will save lives in every corner of the Golden State:

- \$100 million for pre-positioning fire resources in high-risk areas prior to the onset of extreme weather conditions and improved communications technologies to allow more efficient and effective resource deployment.
- \$84 million to purchase 31 Cal Fire engines – that were cut from the state budget back in 1975 – and to hire the skilled and trained personnel to staff the emergency response rigs. There are fewer Cal Fire engines in the field now compared to the mid-seventies.

“Whether it’s catastrophic fire or other disasters, we know that getting mutual aid resources in place ahead of time can save lives and property,” said. “Hundreds, maybe thousands of lives were saved during the Montecito debris flow because our USAR resources were in position before the massive rains hit. California needs to make a commitment to a modern mutual aid response system to meet the changing threat we face,” said Brian Rice, President of California Professional Firefighters.

Especially for California’s smaller and more isolated communities where help is not nearby, the funding could help create ways to accelerate emergency response to fast-moving disasters.

"This funding will enable us to take full advantage of predictive analysis tools, streamline the ordering of mutual aid resources, and pre-position firefighting personnel to better protect our communities," said Steven Hall, Fire Chief for the Central Fire Protection District of Santa Cruz County and president of the Fire Districts Association of California.

Santa Rosa Mayor Chris Coursey added that, “Through California’s Mutual Aid System — where neighbor helps neighbor in times of disaster — firefighters and strike teams from across the state helped our city fight the Tubbs Fire, and at one point, we had 7,000 fire fighters at our camp grounds. As good as our Mutual Aid System is in California, it isn’t as proactive, nimble and robust as it needs to be in this day of ferocious, wind-driven fires. In fact, it took many hours and even days for the full force of Mutual Aid help to reach Santa Rosa as our city burned.”

<http://krctv.com/north-coast-news/eureka-local-news/california-firefighters-and-fire-chiefs-rally-for-expanded-mutual-aid-funding>