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Feeling the Heat

As fire season returns, is San Diego County any safer than before? And have we learned from past mistakes?

KELLY THORNTON



With their majestic 94-foot wingspan, so-called “Super Scoopers” dip gracefully into oceans and lakes, fill their tanks with 800 gallons of water in 12 seconds and then swoop in low, just above the flames of a raging wildfire, releasing a virtual waterfall. If the conditions are right, the Bombardier CL 415 can knock down rampaging flames before they explode into a torrent of death and destruction.

After San Diego County firestorms in 2003 and 2007 claimed 27 lives and more than 4,000 homes, politicians under pressure to beef up the county’s aerial firefighting looked to Super Scoopers as a high-impact solution. But the bombers can’t fly in high Santa Ana winds. They can’t fly at night. They need big water sources with easy access and proximity to fires.

In 2008, when county supervisors were considering whether to lease the planes, fire experts repeatedly warned that they gave a false sense of security, that the money could be much better spent on more versatile and effective helicopters. But the board decided to lease two of these planes anyway, for three months at the height of fire season. The price tag: \$3 million. Proud supervisors held a news conference to announce the contract, complete with a demonstration. One of the planes dipped in and out of Mission Bay, picking up water and dropping it for the cameras.

“It’s going to make a dramatic difference,” Supervisor Ron Roberts said at the time.

It turned out to be one of the planes’ few performances. The aircraft dropped water on only three occasions during the 90-day period — on two blazes at Camp Pendleton and a fire in San Diego. The board did not renew the contract.

“We told [San Diego Mayor Jerry] Sanders and [Supervisor] Roberts, ‘Don’t get fixed-wing aircraft,’ ” says Jeff Bowman, former San Diego fire chief. “Things are being done for political reasons and not for the right reasons.”

As the height of the fire season approaches, many fire experts — including ex-chiefs, consultants, academics and researchers — say the Super Scooper lease is the perfect example of what’s still wrong in San Diego County

firefighting: Bad allocation of scant resources. Misplaced priorities. No long-term funding sources. Lack of leadership. Decisions based on politics. Style over substance.

Conversely, some current fire chiefs and politicians defend the lease as an example of a commitment to do whatever is possible to protect residents from fire. They say the planes saved houses — and would have saved more if the 2008 season had been more severe.

“I would challenge the critics to tell me what other entity in this region has done as much as the county of San Diego in making this region better prepared,” says County Supervisor Dianne Jacob.

These days, there’s a larger context for the years-old fire debate: The sustained recession has led to budget cuts and staff reductions at most of the county’s 50-plus fire departments. Particularly troubling is the plight of the city of San Diego, with the largest fire department in the county. It is embroiled in a pension debacle and a devastating budget deficit that has resulted in rolling “brownouts” of fire stations — meaning eight stations are shut down daily on a rotating basis to cover an \$11 million funding gap.

San Diego Fire Chief Javier Mainar says a child’s death in July might have been prevented if the nearest station wasn’t browned out because of budget cuts. The day Linda Vista toddler Bentley Do choked to death, overburdened emergency responders took almost 10 minutes to arrive. Their goal is a five-minute response.

In a meeting with Mayor Sanders, Police Chief Bill Lansdowne and chief operating officer Jay Goldstone, “I laid it all out,” Mainar recalls. “I said this was something that was quite clear: We had a response delay. I don’t know whether we could have prevented the death. But I feel we need to own up to this response delay. Without hesitation, the mayor said yes.”

A few days later, the San Diego City Council voted to put a half-cent sales tax on the November ballot that would help close the fire department budget gap. According to Goldstone, without the sales tax or some kind of funding miracle, the city could be faced with closing 25 of 47 fire stations.

“I’m hopeful it doesn’t get to that,” Chief Mainar says. “I just don’t see too many ways out of this without revenue.”

San Diego voters have rejected taxing themselves to fund fire and emergency services in the past.

“The citizenry is not willing to trust the government with increased tax revenue to do the right thing, because they don’t think they will,” says Richard Halsey, president of the California Chaparral Institute, a nonprofit wildlands advocacy group based in Escondido.

Experts say budget problems are exacerbated by a culture in San Diego that values new stadiums, city halls, libraries and convention center expansion over infrastructure and emergency services.

“There are misplaced priorities in this town — millions and billions in taxpayer dollars for ‘legacy’ projects but not one red cent for basic public-service projects like fire protection,” says Steve Erie, a public policy expert and political science professor at UCSD who has studied fire issues.

“I’m seeing a pretty deleterious effect that keeps me up at night,” says Augie Ghio, chief of the San Miguel Consolidated Fire Protection District and president of the San Diego County Fire Chiefs Association. “You can only provide the level of service that people or the elected officials are willing to pay for.”

Despite cuts in budget and staff, several chiefs insist they are still better prepared to respond to wildfires now. They say they have enhanced “surge” capability — meaning they are better equipped to strike quickly when a

wildfire is first reported, because of air support and reserve engines placed strategically around the region. They've gone from zero to four firefighting helicopters owned by the city and county, plus one funded by San Diego Gas & Electric and its parent, Sempra Energy — a significant improvement. The county has also purchased about 30 new fire vehicles for rural fire agencies.

Chief Mainar says the 14 reserve fire engines San Diego had in 2003 have been doubled to 28. Still, that's far less than the 50 recommended by former fire chief Bowman in a 2009 report.

Fire departments have better communication and coordination capabilities, thanks to federal Homeland Security grants, and they are about to have super mapping capabilities — what one chief calls “GPS on steroids” — which show fire history, water supplies, access roads, landing zones for helicopters and more. There's now a “Reverse 911,” which alerts residents in the path of wildfires. Other technology improvements are on the horizon.

“We are far better prepared today than we were in 2003,” says Supervisor Jacob. “The county has invested more than \$200 million into fire and emergency medical services.”

San Diego County spends a fraction of what Los Angeles and Orange counties spend for fire protection. While San Diego spent \$153 per capita during 2009, Los Angeles and Orange spent \$219 and \$190 respectively, according to a 2009 report by Bowman and Erik Bruvold of the National University System Institute for Policy Research.

San Diego County's budget is more than \$5 billion, and the county spends about \$15.5 million per year to support fire protection services. Orange County, one-fifth the size of San Diego County (and with a 2010-11 budget of \$5.4 billion), spends more than \$275 million on its fire department, the report says. While the five largest departments in Los Angeles and Orange counties added 241 and 104 positions respectively between 2006 and 2009, the five largest departments in San Diego saw a decrease of 8.5 positions.

During the 2003 firestorm, San Diego firefighting crews were so underfunded and ill-equipped they had to be taken to and from the front lines on city buses because there weren't enough engines to go around. Firefighters had to rush to local stores to buy jackets and equipment. There weren't enough radios for every firefighter. There were dueling press conferences and blame games galore.

“This county's a joke,” says Bowman, who famously refused to evacuate his own north Escondido house during the 2007 firestorms. He has outfitted his home to survive another wildfire, if it comes to that, because he has little faith in the county's ability to protect it.

“I'm frankly disgusted with the whole thing,” he says. “I have enough personal equipment, and I bought my own fire hose and fire-retardant gels.”

Bowman, now a consultant, notes there has been study after study on the subject, with few results. “I have a whole file folder full of reports done in this county for the last 10 years. They all say this is what needs to be done, yet virtually none of this has been done.”

A report released in May says the region needs at least 14 new fire stations to meet even the minimum coverage standards, at a price of \$92 million. A previous study found that the city of San Diego alone needs to add 22 fire stations just to meet minimum standards. One station has been added by developers of 4S Ranch.

And San Diego remains the largest county in California without a regionwide fire department. Though steps have been taken toward consolidating services, a countywide department is still years away.

A year ago, the cities of El Cajon, La Mesa and Lemon Grove combined their fire and emergency medical services under one chief and management team in a move that saves \$560,000 a year. The cities of Encinitas, Del Mar and Solana Beach and the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District are doing the same and saving about \$1.4 million a year.

The county did recently create a County Fire Authority, bringing a number of mostly volunteer back-country departments under its umbrella. The county has committed to spend about \$15.5 million a year for these departments, which previously had to fund themselves through bake sales and spaghetti dinners.

Critics say consolidation is moving at glacial speed. There are still dozens of departments doing their own thing.

All agree: There's still much to be done.


Says Erie, the UCSD professor: "We're just playing Russian roulette because we don't want to pay for the services."

Half-Centsless

One exception to voters' hesitancy to grant the government increased tax revenue was the public safety tax known as state Proposition 172, in 1993. Firefighters campaigned hard for the passage of the half-cent sales tax, but the harsh reality in San Diego County — which receives about \$230 million annually as a result — is that fire departments haven't seen one dime of that money. It has gone only to the district attorney, sheriff's office and probation department. That's been a bitter pill for firefighters.

County officials have said that will not change.

"To take money from 172 takes away money from the sheriff, district attorney and probation," says County Supervisor Dianne Jacob. To divert it to fire protection, she says, would be like "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

 The North County Times - Californian

RANCHO SANTA FE: Pedestrian struck by vehicle

By MORGAN COOK mcook@nctimes.com | Posted: Friday, October 8, 2010 6:26 pm

RANCHO SANTA FE ---- A pedestrian was injured Friday when she was struck by a vehicle near Whispering Palms Country Club, authorities said.


Firefighters responded about 4:20 p.m. to the collision near the intersection of Via De La Valle and Cancha De Golf, a North County Fire Communications dispatcher said.

The vehicle struck a 69-year-old woman, whom firefighters found lying in the street unresponsive when they arrived, said Julie Taber, a spokeswoman for Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District. Taber said the woman was flown to Palomar Medical Center with injuries that were considered serious.

The 71-year-old man driving the vehicle was not injured, Taber said.

She said California Highway Patrol was investigating the cause of the collision.

Call staff writer Morgan Cook at 760-739-6675.

 The North County Times - Californian

REGION: North County tribal fire departments ready to help, leaders say

EDWARD SIFUENTES esifuentes@nctimes.com | Posted: Thursday, October 7, 2010 11:09 am

As the wildfire season kicks into full swing, four North County tribes have begun airing a TV ad telling the public that their fire departments are ready to help in case of an emergency.

The Pauma, Pala, Rincon and San Pasqual reservation were all affected by the devastating 2003 and 2007 wildfires. San Pasqual and Rincon in Valley Center were hit especially hard; dozens of homes were lost in the Paradise and Poomacha fires.

Since 2003, each of the tribes has built modern fire departments using revenue from their casinos.

The TV spots airing on various channels since early last week show images of wildfires and the new fire stations built by the tribes to fight them in the future.

"With the heat and winds, we are looking over our shoulder for signs of smoke every day," Bo Mazzetti, chairman of the Rincon Band of Mission Indians, said last week when temperatures soared past 100 degrees.

Each of the four reservation fire departments is funded by the separate tribal governments, but they serve on and off their reservations and augment the region's firefighting resources, according to the tribal leaders.

"We feel it's more important than ever that the reservations are now equipped to assist in protecting the rural communities," Pala Chairman Robert Smith said.

The Poomacha fire in 2007 burned more than 1,800 acres in Pala, which is about 15 miles north of Escondido near Pauma Valley, but no structures were damaged.

The Pala, Pauma, San Pasqual and Rincon reservation fire departments have a combined force of 88 firefighters, paramedics and emergency medical technicians, according to the tribes.

They have four fire engines, four brush and wildfire engines and three water tenders.

The annual operating budget of the four departments is \$9.4 million, with more than \$30 million invested in equipment and fire stations, the tribes said.

Each of the departments has mutual aid agreements with other firefighting agencies in North County.

Each year, the Pala Fire Department responds to an average of 450 calls for fires, traffic accidents and paramedic services that occur outside the Pala reservation boundaries, Smith said.

Mazzetti said the tribal fire departments bring peace of mind to their communities.

"Once you've been through a wildfire, the fear is constant," Mazzetti said. "Today, we feel safer with our own fire station and mutual aid agreements."

Watch the ad here: <http://www.media.viejasproduction.com>

Call staff writer Edward Sifuentes at 760-740-3511.