

Chief's Message

August 2014



As anticipated, this has been a very active fire season, so I will start by thanking all of you for your extraordinary work over the last several months. I continue to hear stories that make me proud to lead this organization. I heard about a Strike Team Leader who gave a small store owner a tip from his pocket because the man opened his doors after closing hours to let some tired firefighters use the facilities during the recent Northern California lightning siege. I heard about support staff jumping at the chance to get out to the incident bases to be part of the 'total force' need. I heard about employees with homes damaged in the recent earthquake helping their neighbors and stepping up in their state duties, even as they were affected personally. As I visited the fires and drove through communities, and as I coordinated with other state leaders on the many emergencies we have experienced so far this year, I have heard these types of stories from employees honored to wear the CAL FIRE patch, from a grateful public and from the Administration.

I wanted to take this opportunity to provide you an update on the progress that has been made on the Department's exam and hiring processes.

Last October, I shared with you the efforts of the Department's Hiring Working Group and discussed some of the proposed changes to our examination and hiring processes for our fire protection classifications, specifically Fire Fighter II, Fire Apparatus Engineer, and Fire Captain.

In my message, I outlined short term changes that included a new hiring process that was implemented earlier this year. In addition to changing the Fire Captain examination from a continuous testing examination to a closed examination, the Department also centralized Fire Fighter II and Fire Apparatus Engineer hiring.

The short term goals included reducing duplication of effort for both CAL FIRE personnel and candidates, and producing more manageable candidate pools. The changes made to our process were successful and accomplished both of these goals. We still have some things to do to make better use of technology in these processes, but I am confident that we will be successful in that effort as well.

The long term goals included making modifications to class specifications (to better reflect the minimum qualifications necessary to meet current industry standards), improving examination testing methods, and consolidating certain fire protection classes. The Hiring Working Group and members of CAL FIRE's Labor and Human Resource Management Office, as well as administrative staff from both regions, continue to work on these changes, but we have not progressed as quickly as hoped.

The extreme drawdown of personnel as a result of fire activity, as well as significant workload in both the operations and administrative areas of the Department, affected

the ability to provide subject matter experts for exam development, which means we will not be able to hold some of the exams when planned.

We had planned to implement a very aggressive schedule to revamp the Fire Apparatus Engineer and Fire Captain exams in order to produce new lists for use in the 2015 hiring process. This plan involved developing for both of these classifications an entirely new exam that would better assess the qualifications and capabilities of the applicants. Upon further review, and considering some of the impacts described above, it has become clear that the current plan will not produce examination lists in time for the next round of hiring in early 2015. As a result, the Department finds itself in a position of adjustment and change. As we do on emergency incidents, we will meet the challenges before us, adapt to the changing conditions, and charge ahead.

The new plan will be to use the existing Fire Apparatus Engineer and Fire Captain examination process for one more year. I have instructed the Labor and Human Resources Office to reopen the advertisement for these exams, so that candidates who have become qualified over the last year may apply for the exams. In the meantime, I have also authorized the development of a classification specification revision that will significantly enhance the minimum qualifications for firefighters, and I have tasked LHRM to continue to develop the new exams for Fire Apparatus Engineer and Fire Captain, with the idea of giving those exams later in 2015.

I realize that this may be disappointing to many of you, but as I said in October, the examination and hiring requirements of such a large and geographically diverse department such as CAL FIRE are challenging. We have not changed our direction or halted our plan, but we must be flexible in our approach while continually striving to move forward. We will continue to evaluate and amend, where necessary, as these new processes are implemented.

I am extremely proud of and grateful to all of the CAL FIRE employees who have dedicated their time to this effort. It is no small task, and they have attacked it with enthusiasm, commitment, and competence. I remain confident that our goals can be accomplished, and continue to be excited about where we are going with exams and hiring in the future.

Chief Ken Pimlott