

Monthly Message from the Chief

As you might imagine, I feel tremendously honored to have been appointed by Governor Schwarzenegger to be your director and chief. When I started with what was then known as the California Division of Forestry on June 22, 1971, my only goal was to go to my first fire without messing up. Although I had to wait several days before my first test, I have plenty of memories of that first summer. Bear in mind that orientation and safety training was largely done “on the job” in those days. I recall thinking several times while clinging to many smoking hillsides with lungs burning and body aching, “Why am I doing this to myself?” That thought always vanished quickly after some food and rest.



I had similar thoughts as I stayed the course at Hartnell College and Humboldt State University in order to eventually earn a degree in Forestry.

Tenacity seems to be a theme in my life.

Oddly enough, the first question asked during my first media interview as director was, “Why the heck would you want to do this job?” I laughed because I had asked myself the same question many times. It also took me back to the thoughts I had that first summer so many years ago. I would like to share with you how I came to the decision to take on this position and some of what you can expect of me.

Last May, I received a late-night call from Chief Grijalva at my home in Redding. He wanted to meet at the San Jose Airport the following morning so we could attend Governor Schwarzenegger’s visit to the Summit Fire base in Gilroy. During the course of the day, we talked about his plans for the future and about potential successor candidates for director in which he indicated I was in the pool of candidates. After considering the possibility for a couple of weeks, I met with him again and expressed my interest in learning more about the duties of the director. That meeting led to my detail as the Executive Officer.

As I considered the prospect of assuming this office, I outlined my thoughts on paper. I won't go into great detail, but I will share with you my personal beliefs which lead me to take on this considerable challenge, one I had not seriously considered prior to that day in May.

I am keenly aware of the transition we have recently experienced due to many retirements, and I anticipate another turnover in the supervisory and management ranks. These changes, coupled with the difficult economic times our state and country is enduring, makes continuity of leadership extremely important to CAL FIRE. My management philosophies are very similar to those of Chief Grijalva who has been known to say, "Leadership is caring more about others than you do about yourself." I have been very impressed with what he has done for us and have learned much from him. In fact, if not for his leadership, I might very well be retired now.

Throughout my career I have heard the sentiment that it would be great to have a director that worked their way through the ranks...someone who knew the department. I can't claim to have done it all, but have experience in most of the fire ranks and have some experience in resource management.

Portraits of all of our directors hang in the conference room attached to my office. Every time I look at the portrait of Dick Ernest, our eighth director and one who also worked his way through the ranks, I can't help thinking he felt the same way. I know there are many of you who are capable of achieving this, too.

I do not intend to make dramatic changes in the direction we have benefited from during Chief Grijalva's tenure. I was in agreement with the plan he unveiled after his first 100 days of office and am considering only minor course corrections. I intend to engage my Executive Team (Chief Deputy Director, State Fire Marshal, Deputy Director of Fire Protection and Region Chiefs) in collaborative decision making. Others will be involved, as well. The resultant decisions will be widely communicated with accompanying reason, once vetted and agreed upon.

Principles I hold in high regard are honesty, respect and adherence to our established chains of command. Expect me to enforce chain of command, and I will tolerate neither dishonesty nor disrespect.

As on my first day so many years ago, I will strive to meet the demands of the position with which I have been entrusted. The encouragement and faith so many of you have expressed these past weeks has been both gratifying and humbling.

Assemblyman Jim Nielson recently referred to my new position as being “a great honor and a great burden.” The burden is lighter in knowing that I work with competent professionals on whom I can depend, and this honor is shared by all of us that make CAL FIRE the finest organization I know!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Del Walters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "D" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Del Walters, Chief
Director