

Monthly Message from the Chief

September 2010

Septembers like this one tend to leave me a bit on edge. We have had periods of initial attack activity, but nothing like we have seen in recent years. It reminds me of many fire seasons in the past. Some just fizzled out, some had one or two really severe fires toward the end and some turned ugly with major fires burning until December.

What concerns me is that like any activity, one stays sharper when one practices firefighting. It's a natural tendency for complacency to set in, when activity is slow. Complacency often has negative results.

Complacency is not a verb, but it is a word of action, or better said, inaction. It is often associated with a feeling of contentment or self-satisfaction. Being comfortable and confident in ones abilities and state of preparedness is great. What about when that confidence is taken for granted, due to the fact nothing bad has occurred to prove it otherwise? Historically, complacency has led to cutting corners, taking un-necessary risks, under-estimating incident potentials, losing situational awareness, and relaxing discipline regarding physical fitness, nutrition and hydration.

In recent weeks, the department Safety Program has processed several Preliminary Summary Reports (Blue Sheets) and Informational Summary Reports (Green Sheet) referencing incidents that have occurred despite the "slow" fire season. It stands as testimony to the fact that bad things can happen at any moment and without notice. It is essential that as public safety professionals we take every step toward ensuring we are ready to respond and react to a myriad of scenarios threatening the public we serve.

One need only recall the tragic explosion and ensuing fire that disrupted the otherwise tranquil community of San Bruno. Lives were immediately lost. Property was immediately destroyed. Injuries and damage continued to mount as firefighters responded to the scene. The time to prepare for such an incident had passed; the time to execute had arrived. Overconfidence in relaxed skills and physical restrictions due to failure to train for the demands of our jobs could have adversely affected the outcome on this incident. Instead, diligence in keeping minds, skills and bodies sharp for that critical moment prevailed.

Maintaining our situational awareness translates to our ability to recognize when things are changing around us and, more importantly, reacting appropriately to those changes before something bad happens. The Southern California Area Predicted Services group is advising that a condition known as La Niña has become evident, and that long range computer models are in agreement that the condition may persist through the winter. La Niña can have a significant bearing on the precipitation patterns across the United States in the coming months and may likely cause a stronger and more frequent occurrence of Santa Ana winds compared to last fall. Often, the onset of a La Niña brings a higher than average amount of precipitation early in the "rainy season." However, it is typically later in the "rainy season" that a La Niña begins to have a detrimental affect on the amount of total



precipitation received. La Niña conditions during the winter usually result in an overall below average precipitation total during the “rainy season.” Therefore, it is also possible that some level of drought may return to the southern half of the state in early 2011.

As the season of summer gives way to fall; as the daylight hours grow shorter; as the temperatures cool, refrain from taking the path to complacency. Some of the larger and more destructive wildfires in our state’s history have occurred during the months of fall. Cooler temperatures alone do not benefit firefighters and support personnel, if they are not also adequately prepared, rested, hydrated, and well nourished. Are you taking advantage of the “slow” time to train and enhance your skills? What do you need to do to prepare for a north or east wind event? Are your vehicle and your driving skills ready for the first rain? Are you keeping yourself in a healthy and physical state of readiness? Preparing now for what may lie ahead in the next few months does not permit room for complacency. The time to act is now.

Special thanks to Departmental Safety Officer, Dave Teter, for his assistance in composing this month’s message.



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Director