

A Message from Chief Geldert, Director of CDF, on the Anniversary of the 2003 Southern California Fire Siege

One year ago our Department faced the most destructive fire siege in our long history. By the time it was over, more than 750,000 acres had burned, over 3,700 homes were destroyed, and worst of all 24 lives were lost. We saw it all back then, and we are seeing it repeated in the media around the state as we mark this first anniversary.

But there is more to the story than the destruction and loss brought on by the 2003 Fire Siege and that is what I want to address in this message. Never in the history of this state has such a firefighting force been mobilized. More than 6,000 CDF firefighters, and another 8,000 firefighters from other state, federal and local agencies, were assigned to the 2003 Fire Siege.

As I look back on those fires one year later, I cannot help but reflect on the dedication and bravery of our CDF firefighters, and all of the firefighters, who faced flames propelled by Santana Winds that often exceeded 50 miles per hour; the countless lives that were saved, and the thousands of homes and other structures, animals, habitat and watersheds that were threatened by the fires and saved.

The Cedar Fire alone destroyed more than 2,800 homes, however, more than 13,000 homes and structures were saved within the perimeter of the fire. And, another 25,000 homes and structures considered directly threatened within a quarter of a mile were saved. We will never know all of the stories of individual heroism that contributed to that kind of success. But, from one firefighter to another, I know why you were out there, I know what you did, and I know the personal risks you took in fulfilling your duty.

Firefighters on the ground were also well supported from the air as our helicopter and airtanker pilots faced some of the most hazardous flying conditions imaginable. I remember one afternoon when four airtankers had their windshields broken by flying debris in the air. On the San Diego fires alone, CDF pilots completed 215 flights and dropped 223,600 gallons of retardant. And, let us not forget the tremendous number of personnel who provided the vital support services to our firefighting personnel.

In closing, it is important to me on this anniversary of the Siege of 2003, I want to personally say to each of you that you served the people of California well and held up two proud traditions of CDF – unselfishness and professionalism. I am proud of all of you and proud to be your chief. Job well done.

Dale T. Geldert
CDF Fire Chief
Director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

