

Fire chief worries about safety of S. Lake Tahoe

Publisher's note: *This is the second of two stories about the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department.*

By Kathryn Reed

Fire – it's going to happen. Where? When? How destructive? Those are unknowns. But the reality is the resources are lacking in the city, the basin, California, Nevada and throughout the west.

"Mutual aid" has been talked about at all levels of the fire service for eons, but it wasn't until the deadly Wine Country fires last fall that the issue started making headlines.

Locally, the need for outside resources has been played out over and over again. Look at all the different fire trucks that often arrive at an event of any consequence. It's not just an event like the Angora Fire that demonstrates the cooperative nature and need of fire resources, it's much smaller blazes as well.

South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston was in Sacramento last month testifying before a legislative committee about the need to improve the state's mutual aid system. He is the president-elect of the California Fire Chief's Association.

Outside help didn't come to Santa Rosa last fall until six hours after it was requested. Help would take even longer to get to Tahoe.

Fire officials are lobbying the state to mobilize resources when there are red flag days or other threats like flooding and mudslides. This way the people and equipment are already deployed, so the destruction and loss of life would be less.

Meston's attention is also focused on local issues.

He is in the process of putting together a study called the Standards of Cover. It is an in depth look at all the safety issues in the city. Every dwelling in the city is being recorded – including the type of siding, construction materials and vegetation.

He had hoped to have it ready to be presented to the City Council in May, but that could be delayed since he now has the added role of being acting city manager. Still, he wants it before the council before budget discussions. It is more than three-quarters completed.

Meston believes the Standards of Cover, which the city has never had, should be the guiding document for decision-making for the fire department.

In the past the ISO (Insurance Service Organization) rating was something fire departments coveted.

"They don't verify any information. They say whatever the chief says is good enough for us," Meston said of the ISO process.

The city's last ISO rating from a couple years ago was a 4 (scale is 1-10, with 1 the best). Meston commented how that is the same score as the previous rating and that the on-duty resources have been cut significantly in that time.

Today SLTFD has eight people on duty at any given time. There are two three-person engines, one person in a squad and a battalion chief.

"Two issues really affect fire loss – how quickly you get there, and how many people you get there with to do the job," Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The national standard is 17 and we send eight."

He said the document he is creating will not sugar coat the

“terrible” response times, staffing issues and the consequences – both real and potential.

“What has happened is our homes are far more combustibile than the 1960s because of plastics, coverings,” Meston said. “We reach flash-over, when a fire consumes a great majority of oxygen and people in the house no longer survive; we reach it quicker than in the 1960s. So it matters how fast we get there to minimize the loss of life and property.”

The purpose of the document is to give elected officials facts to use when it comes to making decisions about the fire department. Meston will also include recommendations in the document.

“We need to have a discussion about priorities; about priorities citywide. We are trying to be everything to everybody and we can’t be,” Meston said.