

Opinion: Calif. needs to rethink fire mutual aid

By Jeff Meston

Last October, California experienced a series of devastating wildfires that destroyed property and took lives. In a four-month period, the state endured fires and floods from San Diego to Mendocino that destroyed more than 11,000 homes and commercial structures and killed 64 Californians.

Local government fire and rescue personnel and equipment comprised up to 80 percent available resources for mutual aid throughout the state. South Lake Tahoe Fire Department along with other fire agencies from around the basin engaged in these critical fire fights.



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Rising temperatures, prolonged drought and high winds – all ingredients that make for increased risk of catastrophic fires – are going to be a part of our lives and communities for the foreseeable future.

Since 2000, we have witnessed 14 of the 20 largest wildfires and 12 of the 20 most destructive wildfires in California history. The Northern California fires generated more than \$10 billion in insurance claims, making it the most costly fire disaster in our state's history.

The question on the minds of all of those who live or have homes in the Tahoe basin is could it happen here? In 2007 we experienced the Angora Fire, which destroyed 254 residences, and damaged 35 homes. This fire loss was estimated at \$141 million. Lake Tahoe is quite different from the Sonoma/Napa area as well as the Ventura/Los Angeles area. We do not currently have the regional firefighting capacity of our neighboring locations, as we live in a pine forest and we are very dependent on the California statewide mutual aid plan that was developed in the 1950s to bring us help.

The Lake Tahoe Basin does not have adequate resources to battle a mega fire, and based upon history it's only a matter of when that will happen. Lake Tahoe is relatively isolated with resources only able to traverse the main thoroughfares of Interstate 80 and Highway 50.

In Santa Rosa, just 130 of the more than 400 requests for mutual aid were filled within the initial hours because dispatch systems were overwhelmed. Sufficient help to contain the fire didn't arrive until the third day. This is in Santa Rosa, within the SF Bay Area, where large metropolitan fire departments like Contra Costa Consolidated Fire District, San Francisco Fire Department, Oakland Fire Department and the Alameda County Fire departments are located.

California's Mutual Aid System is recognized as a world-class system for communities to share disaster response resources. However, it's a "reactive" system built to add resources as disasters grow beyond the capability of what's on the ground. California's fire service leadership is working diligently to change this system from a reactive to pro-active system.

One of the most effective tools for preventing fires from quickly spreading out of control, or to immediately address other natural disasters such as flooding and mudslides, is to pre-position fire strike teams in areas where high risks are predicted. A lesson learned from our recent fires is that pre-

positioning works. The strategy of deploying resources before disaster strikes (called pre-positioning) allows us to attack wind-driven wildfires in the first minutes or hours after they ignite, preventing them from becoming the urban conflagrations like those we witnessed last year. It allows us to give warnings to impacted communities sooner and to rescue mudslide and flood victims as disasters begin to unfold.

The California Fire Service leadership is asking Gov. Jerry Brown to allocate \$100 million in fiscal year 2018-19 to reimburse local fire agencies for their costs to staff up and pre-position resources, to improve staffing levels in communications centers, to warn residents when their communities are in immediate peril, and to add GPS tracking to firefighting apparatus all over the state.

The California Fire Service currently has to increase the pace and scale of everything we do to suppress fires. Communities like ours, close to forest lands and wildlands are particularly vulnerable; we suffer from minimal escape routes within our community, and a lack of firefighting resources throughout the Tahoe basin. There is no better way to reduce risks and mitigate the impacts of climate-driven disasters than to be ready to fight fires and other disasters in the first hour.

We urge Gov. Brown and the Legislature for funding in the next state budget to implement these strategies.

Jeff Meston is fire chief for the city of South Lake Tahoe, president elect for the California Fire Chiefs Association, and serves on the board of directors for FIRESCOPE.