

Chief's Monthly Message

February 2013

We are just entering into the first budget cycle in several years where instead of facing tough cuts, or the real threat of further cuts, we are “cautiously optimistic” and moving forward with a budget that can be sustained. We have achieved unprecedented success resulting from hard work by the Department, our sister agencies and a broad spectrum of stakeholders. For example, the Legislature and the Administration passed a package of reforms to the Forest Practice Act that included a lumber assessment which will provide a stable funding source for our Timber Harvest Program. This is the most significant reform to the Forest Practice Act since it was passed in 1973.



Unfortunately, recent incomplete and sensationalized media coverage of the Wildland Fire Investigation, Training and Equipment Fund, referred to as WiFITER, has needlessly detracted from our successes and wasted valuable staff time and resources that would have been much better spent directly serving the public. The fund has been an invaluable tool in ensuring that the investigators, case managers and staff who participate in the cost recovery process receive the training and equipment necessary to effectively perform their jobs. We have never attempted to hide the existence of the fund and I will not apologize for using it to improve our cost recovery efforts. In fact, the fund has not only benefited CAL FIRE, but also local government and contract county investigators and the attorneys who prosecute civil and criminal actions. WiFITER is just one of many tools within our Civil Cost Recovery Program that have contributed to a significant increase in the recovery of fire suppression costs returned to the State's General Fund. Since 2005, the Program has recovered over \$93 million.

In no way should you question the credibility of our employees, both current and retired, who have worked tirelessly on fire investigations and civil cost recovery. The personal attacks are unwarranted and unacceptable. Please be assured that the Executive Team and program managers are working with the Administration and the Legislature to answer questions about what the fund is and how it is used. The Attorney General's Office is currently defending the fund's use in court; therefore I am unable to share specific information with you at this time. I will continue to respect the litigation process and not attempt to try this issue in the press. Over time, the truth will prevail, the motives of those attacking the fund and the Program will be exposed, and I will be able to speak more freely.

I urge you to stay focused on our mission of serving the public and not let the political and media issues we are addressing here in Sacramento distract you from your duties. We will continue to forge ahead in all of our program areas as there is much work to do and a lot to prepare for. Training and the upcoming fire season should be foremost on everyone's mind. There were some amazing feats of accomplishment across the spectrum of programs in 2012,

and that momentum is continuing in 2013. I am proud of all of you and the work you do every day.

Chief Ken Pimlott
CAL FIRE Director