



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Budget Request for \$100 million to Strengthen Disaster Readiness

- Q. Why is the fire service asking the state to provide \$100 million for disaster readiness and response?**
- A.** Disasters like wildfires and floods are becoming more frequent and more severe. California’s “fire season” is now year-round. Extended droughts, heavier rains and stronger winds are contributing to a “new normal” of increased threats to community safety. If we are going to better protect lives and property from these difficult new threats, our approach to fighting natural disasters must change. We must be much more “proactive” rather than merely be “reactive.” We can no longer wait for fires or other climate-driven disasters to occur before dispatching first responders and equipment. We now have the tools to better predict where fires, extreme winds, flooding and mudslides are most likely to occur during extreme weather conditions. We must have the resources to put strike teams in place before disasters strike, when they are small and adequate defenses can be established around populated neighborhoods.
- Q. What’s wrong with California’s current approach to disaster response?**
- A.** For nearly 70 years, California has used a “Mutual Aid System” that allows local fire agencies throughout the state to share resources (combined with state and federal agencies) during large-scale disasters. This system ensures that the bigger a disaster gets, the more personnel and equipment can be sent to help. The problem is that it takes hours and sometimes days to mobilize these resources after a disaster has already started. Early intervention during a disaster is the key to saving lives and protecting property. As an example, when a fire ignites in dry conditions and heavy winds, it can spread quickly – by as much as an acre per second. Unless fire strike teams are nearby and can attack the fire immediately, that is too fast to contain and prevent fires from jumping to neighborhoods, as occurred during the fire siege of October 2017.
- Q. What’s the solution?**
- A.** The solution to increasing disaster threats is to send more dispatch workers, vehicles and firefighters into a community before disaster strikes – a strategy called “pre-positioning.” This strategy includes the ability of local fire agencies to have more of their own equipment and personnel at the ready and call in advance help from neighboring fire districts and state agencies. Pre-positioning would also include bolstering the staffing in the local emergency communications centers to manage the increased call volume and requests for resources from first responders in the field during these disasters. Building up resources in advance ensures that when disaster strikes, the response is both immediate and adequate to protect lives and property.

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Q. Why can't local fire agencies do pre-positioning now?

A. Although some limited pre-positioning happens today, there are two barriers to its widespread use – lack of money and outdated systems. Today, local fire agencies only get reimbursed if they are sent to help on a disaster that's already happening. In other words, the sending agency won't be reimbursed for providing help in advance. In September 2017, \$25 million was appropriated for OES to reimburse local government fire agencies for pre-positioning under the Mutual Aid System. By this spring, a mechanism is expected to be in place for the first time to reimburse local governments for pre-positioning. Moreover, the Mutual Aid System is not set up to use "predictive tools" like weather alerts to deploy more dispatch workers, firefighters and equipment before disaster strikes.

Q. How can we predict when and where disaster will strike?

A. National Weather Service alerts of approaching hot temperatures or high winds can be combined with data about soil conditions, overgrown or dead vegetation, electricity infrastructure and other information. In addition to understanding the local conditions, advanced data tools can inform safety workers how many resources (people and equipment) are available and nearby to help in a potential disaster and what type of resources will be needed for a given event.

Q. How would the \$100 million be used?

A. Chiefs for local fire agencies have proposed budgeting \$87 million for the Governor's Office of Emergency Services to use, as needed, to reimburse costs for pre-positioning personnel and equipment in communities that are preparing for disaster. In addition, \$13 million is proposed for improved communications technology and communications center support to modernize the Mutual Aid System. These expenditures would be in addition to funding that Governor Brown has proposed to add 106 state-owned fire engines to the Mutual Aid System.

Q. Is \$100 million enough to protect communities from disasters? One-time or ongoing?

A. Deploying firefighters to every extreme weather alert would cost many hundreds of millions of dollars. Fire chiefs across California believe \$100 million would fund critical updates to modernize the Mutual Aid System and provide an initial pool of money to begin amassing multiple fire agencies in advance of when and where fires or floods are predicted. Given the growth of extreme weather conditions, the fire chiefs believe that California needs to make an annual, ongoing commitment to pre-positioning.

Q. How much money can we save with pre-positioning?

A. It is estimated that the disaster response costs for the October-December 2017 fires is \$1.8 billion. This does not include the nearly \$12 billion in losses claimed on insurance policies. Although it is unknown how many lives, homes or money might be saved by pre-positioning, what is widely recognized is that the state needs to enhance its mutual aid capabilities and create a more nimble and proactive Mutual Aid System that will result in fewer lives lost and less property damage.