

Commentary

Lessons Learned From the San Diego Wildfires: Living In Paradise Has its Price

Celeste Murphy-Greene

The residents of San Diego, CA have recently experienced the worst fire on record in the history of the State of California. Of the four fires that ravaged San Diego County for over two weeks, the Cedar fire was the largest and most damaging. At the time of this writing, the Cedar fire is the only fire in the county still burning, but is mostly contained. In total 391,856 acres have been burned and 2,337 homes have been destroyed. The current human death toll stands at 16 victims. It is difficult to estimate the true number of animals lost in the blaze. During the week of October 27-31 local schools and businesses were shut down for days mainly due to the smoke filled skies creating extremely poor air quality. Residents were informed to stay inside and keep all windows closed to prevent ash and smoke from entering. Shelters opened at high schools and churches and police drove through streets warning people to evacuate. County residents stood glued to the television as the firefighters heroically battled the blazing inferno that resembled

a relentless growing monster. The fires were fueled with dry underbrush created by 180 days without rainfall, warm Santa Ana winds and years of vegetation growth. All the elements necessary for the "perfect storm" were present. The fire was like Godzilla, raging from one end of the county to another, destroying everything in its path. The devastating impacts of these fires will be felt for years to come. While firefighters continue to battle the blazing flames, impacted residents are moving forward digging through the ashes, putting their lives back together and trying to continue with the normalcy of daily life. Yet the question remains, how could these fires rage out of control for so long and destroy so much?

Lack of Resources

During the first two days of the fires, the fire chief of the City of San Diego appeared on the news constantly requesting more resources to fight the fires. San Diego had sent several hundred firefighters north to combat the flames blazing in San Bernardino and Los Angeles. Due to the rules set forth by the State of California, once a firefighter has been

dispatched to fight a fire in another jurisdiction, he/she may not return to their home jurisdiction until they are released. Unfortunately, this left the City of San Diego with only 400 fire fighters to combat the monstrous inferno. San Diego is the second largest city in the State of California, yet the city would need to add an additional 800 fire fighters to reach the national average for a city with a population exceeding one million. Fortunately, within days thousands of dedicated firefighters poured into San Diego from all over the United States including Northern California, Arizona, Nevada and as far east as Virginia. By mid-week, over 4,000 firefighters were working diligently to extinguish the wildfires.

Of the largest counties in California, San Diego is the only one without a county-wide fire department. Instead, the county is comprised of 44 full-time and volunteer fire departments. This patchwork approach creates another problem when trying to coordinate efforts. To make matters worse, city funding of a leased fire and rescue helicopter ran out the week before the fires began, limiting air support necessary to combat the blazing flames. In essence, San Diego was totally ill-equipped and under staffed to combat fires of this magnitude.

Why was San Diego So Ill-Prepared?

The big question facing city and county officials in the aftermath of this disaster is why was San Diego so ill-prepared to fight the fires? As San Diego City Fire Chief Jeff Bowman stated at a news conference; "The city didn't have the resources to fight the fires because the people aren't willing to pay for them." Within the past decade, city and county residents have repeatedly voted down ballot measures to increase funding for emergency response and to improve fire protection services. Yet at the same time the county population has

continued to grow, putting a strain on an already limited budget. These budget restraints and population growth have impacted fire protection services. In the 1980s, the City of San Diego Fire Department's response time goal was four minutes. Due to increased congestion and urban sprawl the response time goal is now six minutes.

The Price of Public Services

In essence, as residents' demands for fire protection services have increased, their willingness to pay for the services has not. In 1978, California passed the now infamous Proposition 13, limiting the property tax collected by local governments. While Proposition 13 has continued to limit local governments' ability to generate revenue, Californians continue to increase their demands for services. Until citizens are willing to pay their fair share, public services in San Diego and throughout California will continue to be constrained by a lack of funding. One of the main lessons to be learned from the San Diego fires is citizens need to pay to live in paradise. Living in an arid climate with near perfect weather has its price, as all San Diego residents recently witnessed. If there is going to be a long-term solution to the ever present threat of fires in Southern California, people must be willing to pay to be protected.

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