

Forestry department does it all — even battle blazes

State agency responds to all emergencies big and small

By RIA MEGNIN
The Salinas Californian

In rural south Monterey County, a car crash or heart attack could mean a visit from the California Department of Forestry.

Forestry?

“We’re an all-risk fire department, so we respond to all emergencies — vehicle accidents, medical aids, structure fires, hazardous material calls, search and rescue — just like a typical city fire department,” said Frank Royos, battalion chief at the CDF’s King City station.

Of course the state’s \$19 million “wildlands fire agency” also performs traditional forestry work, such as battling forest fires and working with landowners and logging companies to plan tree removal. The department also conducts controlled burns and manages conservation. In 1995, it merged with the office of the state fire marshal and now provides fire-prevention programs, arson investigations and approves fireworks permits and other licenses.

But the CDF’s focus is often on emergency services. Besides day-to-day medical and fire response, the CDF takes the lead in large disasters, such as train derailments and earthquakes.

“We’re the ones the governor calls,” Royos said. “We’re world-renowned for being able to handle any type of incident.”

The San Benito-Monterey unit of the CDF provides fire and rescue services to about 100,000 people, focusing on areas outside city boundaries. It administers the South Monterey County Fire District by contract, operates 11 state-funded stations and provides staff and management for four others. It also works closely



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO

Justin Kimbrell, of the California Department of Forestry, stands by with a hose and watches the hillside to prevent flames from the burning home on San Benancio Road from spreading in October 2003.

THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY, SAN BENITO-MONTEREY UNIT

n **CHIEF:** George Haines (acting)

n **STAFFING:** 145 permanent, 85 seasonal, 130 inmate firefighters from California Department of Corrections.

n **LOCATION:** Eleven state-funded fire stations, four cooperative fire agreements, headquarters in Monterey.

n **HISTORY:** Forest ranger assigned to Monterey County in 1927; based in King City.

n **ONLINE:** www.fire.ca.gov/php.

with local agencies.

“We’ve got a real good mutual-aid system in Monterey County, and we all work very well together,” said George Haines, acting chief of the CDF’s San Benito-Monterey unit. “We make a point of including each other in training and meetings.”

Legacy in south county

The unit’s headquarters moved from King City to Monterey in 1993 for better collaboration with local agencies, but the CDF’s legacy in south county goes back generations. In 1927, the first Monterey County CDF ranger was

assigned to King City.

“He was charged with recruiting people to fight fires,” Haines said. “On a big one, they’d literally dump people out of the saloons to go fight it.”

Five years later, King City’s first CDF station was built, replaced in 1962 with a building at 743 Reich St. that today serves six full-time and 11 seasonal staff and houses two engines — still the largest station in the unit, although Royos said it’s in need of replacement. Equipment at the site includes a bulldozer, a four-wheel-drive engine, a 1,200-gallon engine and Royos’ pickup. Rangers carry breathing apparatus and

full trauma gear, and all are trained as emergency medical technicians.

Remoteness a challenge

South county rangers face challenges in the field, often tied to the remoteness of the region. Besides having slower response times, staff have long commutes.

“Monterey County’s expensive, so a lot of our folks travel here to do the shift,” Royos said.

The King City battalion oversees about 1.3 million acres and a population of 35,000, from Chualar south to Lockwood/San Lucas Road, including cities on a mutual-aid basis.

But the battalion’s greatest concern is one shared by the CDF statewide.

“We’re facing a mass retirement because of the hiring push in the late ’60s, early ’70s,” he said. “We’re going to lose up to 50 percent of the department. Our biggest challenge is training and getting everybody up to speed to fill all those posts.”

Contact Ria Megnin
at rmegnin@thecalifornian.com.