



# **PIONEER FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT**

## **FIRE • RESCUE • EMS**



P.O. Box 128  
7061 Mt. Aukum Road  
Somerset, California 95684  
Phone (530) 620-4444 • Fax (530) 620-4317  
[www.pioneerfire.org](http://www.pioneerfire.org)

### **To our Pioneer Fire Protection District Communities**

We want to send the district best wishes to all of you and address a few areas of concerns.

I understand a lot of you want answers, details and have lots of questions (especially why Grizzly Flats order has not been lifted).

Grizzly Flats:

The Team is working diligently on making Grizzly Flats safe to return, words cannot describe the devastation that is seen in 85 to 90% of Grizzly Flats. This area has major obstacles for us, the incident command and utility organizations. It has been my experience from responding to major destructive incident throughout this country (in my past positions); that it is challenging to make it safe to return families back into their community. We have to consider all the issues, such as restoration of the infrastructures and particularly safety. This team is moving more efficiently than I have seen in the past. Please bear with the team that has to make it safe for you to return. It's a disaster and it will really hit hard when you see it. We cannot give you an exact time, because it has too many variables. However, I am confident they are working day and night to accomplish repopulation and to help us all move forward.

To all effected by the fire:

Most of you have returned to witness the damage and devastation in your area, please bear with the process and the efforts still moving forward to make sure we are out of danger. Some of you have lost property and your homes. Restoration will take some time, it's a slow process but it will return.

Understanding what happened:

A fire began in the National Forest and in our Fire Protection District that was extremely difficult to find and access. I watched a team of cooperators try to access this fire, risking themselves, apparatus and equipment to access and suppress this fire. Several times the fire threatened our crew's safety; each time my stomach turned over watching them escape and reposition to contain this fire. Most of you are aware the fire began and continued to burn in a geographically challenging area with extremely dry fuel loads and dangerous terrain. I personally witnessed how the team all worked diligently and efficiently to get the resources we needed and developed a strategic plan of attack. However, every time these resources and personnel worked to contain the fire, it refused to adhere and along with the unpredictable weather and terrain it made it challenging and dangerous. This team continued to engage and place themselves in harm's way.

When it appeared we were getting appropriate lines, equipment, hoses in place, crews and teams into position, the fire unpredictably spotted in areas of challenging terrain and in several different locations. Limited access and lighting made it even more challenging, however, we witnessed crews



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rushing into harm's way to slow this beast down. In a short period of time this fire created what I believe to be a fire storm (its own strong winds similar to a vortex). It spotted several thousand feet in several different directions. In a short period of time, it took over Leoni Meadows, when the team decided to leave a crew to limit the intensity and loss at Leoni Meadows; I realized I had placed a small team in a challenging and dangerous situation. Even to the point that I made a quick recording to my family (just in case!) in that recording I told my team and family I was nervous for our crews to be in this dangerous situation. They were incredible; working diligently in this dangerous and challenging fire to save what they could; even though some were aware they lost their homes too.

There was no winning this fight, it was a relentless fire, it was much bigger than you can imagine! I have experienced this type of fire storm three times in my long career. We always lost, but the most rewarding thing in this fight, after seeing the destruction was that we had not experienced loss of life to this point and limited injuries. I am proud of the efforts and risk the team made to save what they did and limiting the injuries and loss of life; this is due to the quick actions of the Sheriff's department (LEOs), Cal Fire, NFS, all our local cooperators, (Amador, El Dorado, Sacramento and surrounding cooperators county agencies). In addition; I could not be anymore thankful for the hard work and relentless efforts your Grizzly Flats Fire Safe Council has done over its 15 plus years to help your community escape with your lives. This includes the efforts of the EDSO (OES), USF, Cal Fire, CHP, PFPD and many more.

Healing and the road to recovery:

You are going to experience an unbelievable number of changing emotions! I want to tell you I am not an expert or professional counselor. However, it's okay to yell, scream, shout, cry, talk, be angry and frustrated. Its part of moving on and it's going to be a challenging, frustrating, difficult road to recovery. But look at all the positives, you are hardworking Americans with a purpose and who have faced difficult challenges in the past and you will persevere. We need to work together, support one another and begin our new adventure. Please embrace what has happened and let's move forward together. Let's refrain from the unsubstantiated rumors and focus as a unit to be part of the solution. Remember, we did not start this fire!

The Team:

Thousands of Firefighters, LEOs, Public Utilities and more have engaged in this battle; to know they have risked unforeseen dangers, injuries, and potentially death is every leader's emotional challenge. To know we have had injuries is gut wrenching, FF and Volunteers who have lost their homes, and valued memories make it even more unbearable. To know a volunteer FF from another agency is sitting in a burn center, with his family and a handsome 2-year-old boy that worships his dad for being a FF makes me angry, disappointed and frustrated that it occurred at our fire. We have had our own injuries, loss and damage to our stations, equipment, and apparatus; along with several other agencies personnel being injured and damage to their equipment. Who knows what the long-term effect for all 5,000 emergency personnel will be? However, when I see the signs of appreciation



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throughout the community, they are absolutely right; these incredible men and women are the best. They don't consider themselves as heroes but I will let you be the judge of that.

The leadership team worked diligently to stop this angry beast, their expertise, experience and emotions were challenged from the beginning; none of them wanted this to turn out the way it did. They functioned as a highly skilled and educated team, challenged one another's expertise and experience to win this battle.

As your Fire Chief, I respect the team and all their tireless efforts and continued efforts.

*Mark S. Matthews,*

*PFPD Fire Chief*