



Fighting Fire With Funding: Talking Points for External Audiences

These talking points are concise summaries of the key issues, impacts, and solutions regarding fire service funding. They can be used by anyone speaking to external audiences – from community meetings to casual conversations – to clearly and persuasively articulate the urgent need for funding support for California’s local fire agencies.

Core Message:

California’s local fire agencies are facing a critical funding crisis that directly jeopardizes public safety and strains our statewide emergency response system. While CalFire is a vital state agency primarily responsible for wildland fire protection across California, our local fire districts are the foundational layer of emergency response in our communities. They provide all-risk services—from structure fires and medical emergencies to hazardous materials and local wildfire response—within their specific jurisdictions. Crucially, these local agencies also form the backbone of the statewide mutual aid system, providing over 60% of the personnel and a significant portion of the engines that support CalFire during major incidents like the Palisades fires. Both are essential, but the strength of the entire system hinges on the robust funding and operational capacity of our local fire districts.

I. The Problem: Increased Demands vs. Outdated Funding

- **Expanded Scope of Service:** Our fire protection districts and departments no longer just fight fires. Over the last 50 years, their roles have dramatically increased to include primary emergency medical services (EMS), hazardous materials incidents, water rescues, urban search and rescue, and extensive wildfire mitigation. EMS alone now accounts for the majority of fire service call volume.
- **Skyrocketing Costs:** Providing these expanded services comes at a significantly higher cost. Labor, training, equipment, and compliance with national standards and regulations have surged.
- **Stagnant Funding:** Despite increased demands and costs, fire agencies’ primary funding mechanisms (like property taxes) have remained largely stagnant since the 1970s. Other mechanisms, like fees for service, often don’t cover full costs, and special taxes are difficult to implement and unreliable.

II. The Impact: Consequences for Communities & Statewide Safety

- **Local Service Reductions:** The funding shortfall leads to direct impacts on local communities, including brownouts (temporary unit closures), increased response times, and deferred capital projects for essential equipment and infrastructure.



FDAC
Fire Districts Association of California

- **Strained Mutual Aid System:** Local fire agencies form the foundation of California's emergency response and are crucial to the statewide mutual aid system. When local agencies are underfunded, it strains this system, putting all Californians at greater risk.
- **Alarming "Unable to Fill" Rates:** The strain on mutual aid is evident in the alarming number of "Unable to Fill" (UTF) calls for additional resources. In 2020, California experienced a staggering 19,435 UTFs, highlighting a breakdown in local operational capacity.
- **Local Agencies are the Majority:** During recent large incidents like the Eaton and Pacific Palisades fires, over 60% of personnel came from local agencies, demonstrating their vital role in large-scale emergencies.

III. The Solution: Collaborative, Long-Term Funding

- **Prioritize Local Agencies:** While investment in CAL FIRE is important, it is equally critical to support the hundreds of local fire agencies that form the foundation of California's emergency response.
- **Focus on Funding, Not Just Equipment:** The true need is to address historical underfunding and outdated legislative mechanisms, not just to add more equipment without the resources to maintain it.
- **Collaborative Solutions:** Solutions must be developed in collaboration with fire service experts, including established associations like the Fire Districts Association of California (FDAC), California Fire Chiefs Association (CalChiefs), and FIRESCOPE.
- **Secure & Sufficient Funding:** We need long-term, secure, and sufficient funding mechanisms that are responsive to modern service demands and costs.

Call to Action:

- Urge the Governor and state legislators to immediately address this critical funding shortfall.
- Advocate for collaborative, long-term solutions that prioritize secure and sufficient funding for California's local fire services.
- Emphasize that ensuring fire districts are adequately funded is crucial for maintaining a safe and effective emergency response system for all Californians.