

WHAT IF... California's Local Fire Districts Aren't Adequately Funded?

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California's local fire services are facing a severe funding crisis that directly impacts public safety across the state. This isn't just a budget issue; it's a "what if" scenario with critical implications for every community.

WHAT IF... Service Demands Continue to Outpace Funding?

- **Longer Response Times:** Outdated funding mechanisms, coupled with dramatically increasing service demands, mean local fire agencies struggle to maintain adequate staffing, equipment, and infrastructure. This leads directly to longer response times when every second counts.
- **More "Brownouts" and Station Closures:** Funding shortages have led to brownouts, increased response times, delayed infrastructure investments, layoffs, and station closures.
- **Deferred Maintenance and Outdated Equipment:** Critical capital projects, like maintaining facilities or upgrading essential equipment, are continuously postponed. Fire agencies are often forced to prioritize existing service levels over necessary upgrades, even tearing down facilities to rebuild them due to the high cost of bringing them up to code.

WHAT IF... CalFire Did Not Have Support from Local Fire Agencies and Access to Their Engines and Manpower?

- **Overwhelmed State Resources:** While investment in CalFire is vital, local fire agencies form the foundation of California's emergency response and are essential to the statewide mutual aid system.
- **Catastrophic Mutual Aid Failures:** During recent fires in Eaton and Pacific Palisades, over 60% of personnel came from local agencies. Local government engines account for 42% of the total engines deployed in California's firefighting efforts. The mutual aid system is already strained due to local funding shortfalls, leading to unprecedented "Unable to Fill" (UTF) calls for additional



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resources. In 2020, the fire service in California experienced a staggering 19,435 UTFs, and in 2021, 11,422 UTFs, indicating a significant breakdown in operational capacity. If local agencies cannot provide this support, the entire state becomes more vulnerable during major emergencies.

- **Increased Risk to Life and Property:** When resources are inadequate, locally or statewide, lives will be threatened, property is at risk, and what was once a manageable crisis may devolve into an unmitigated disaster.

WHAT IF... Firefighters Can't Meet Modern Demands?

- **Reduced All-Risk Capabilities:** Over the past five decades, fire districts have expanded their roles to include emergency medical services (EMS), hazardous materials incidents, water rescue, aircraft rescue firefighting, and search and rescue operations. Without adequate funding, the specialized training, vehicles, and equipment required for these “all-risk” capabilities cannot be sustained.
- **Strained EMS Response:** Emergency medical service now accounts for the majority of call volume in the fire service. Without proper funding, the sophisticated prehospital treatment and advanced life support (ALS) that communities rely on could be severely impacted.
- **Unprepared for Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Fires:** The expansion of the wildland-urban interface (WUI) throughout the state has enhanced wildfire risk, with more than 11 million Californians estimated to live in the WUI. In the past 10 years, demand for wildfire response has skyrocketed. If local fire districts are not adequately funded, they cannot implement the specialized ground, air, and equipment strategies needed to combat modern wildfires and protect lives and property in these high-risk areas.

The Bottom Line:

The current funding shortfall is a pervasive crisis for California's fire service, jeopardizing the safety and preparedness of communities statewide. Immediate action and collaborative solutions are crucial to secure sufficient and stable funding for local fire districts, ensuring they can continue to protect all Californians and maintain a safe and effective emergency response system.