

# FIRE ADMINISTRATIONS COMBINE COVERAGE

## *JENNY LIND, RANCHO CALAVERAS TEAMS UNITE TO BETTER SERVE DISTRICTS*

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May 02, 2012

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VALLEY SPRINGS - About 3:30 a.m. Tuesday, someone in the Valley Springs area dialed 911 to report a person with a fractured leg. It was a routine call, and yet it marked a milestone for the Valley Springs area.

It was the first emergency response heralding a new era in which firefighters serving communities along Highway 26 and Highway 12 are unified under a single administration.

"It's a more efficient way to deliver service. It's a more efficient way to back each other up," said Kim Olson, who, effective Tuesday, began serving as chief of both the Jenny Lind and Foothill fire protection districts.

Foothill Fire Protection District serves a territory along Highway 12 that includes Wallace, Burson and downtown Valley Springs, as well as the La Contenta neighborhood and rural areas around New Hogan Reservoir.

The Jenny Lind Fire Protection District serves a region along Highway 26 that includes Jenny Lind and Rancho Calaveras.

But while the unified administration of the two fire districts is new, it isn't a change that most people will notice. The two agencies had already been working closely and standardizing their procedures.

"We've been training together on Thursday nights for a year," said Jason Robitaille, who is deputy fire chief of the unified administration.

One change that someone might notice is the "Calaveras Consolidated" logo on the side of vehicles that Olson or Robitaille will be driving to the scene of an emergency.

For right now, that logo is there to signal that the two chiefs serve the entire region. More changes are ahead. By July 1, the boards of the two districts expect to form a joint-powers authority to formally create Calaveras Consolidated Fire District. A year later, if all goes well, the two districts will dissolve and be governed by a single board. Then the "Calaveras Consolidated" logo will go on the big engines as well.

"One of the comments we keep hearing is that this should have happened years ago," said David Sant, president of the Foothill Fire Protection District board.

Efforts to reduce call times and to spend money more efficiently prompted the change. It also didn't hurt that almost the entire membership of the boards of the two districts changed a little over a year ago.

As recently as 2010, the two districts employed a total of five chiefs between them. Officials admit that at times, there were turf wars.

The new arrangement means there are only two paid chiefs - Robitaille and Olson - and Olson works part time.

That means more money can go to hiring a few paid firefighters to ensure 24-hour staffing. The Jenny Lind district began staffing its station 24 hours a day in November, leading to a dramatic reduction in response time, Olson said.

Between them, the two districts respond to about 1,300 emergency calls a year and have a budget of about \$550,000. The only reason they are able to maintain eight fire engines and two water tenders is because the districts' approximately 40 volunteers do most of the work.

Until the joint-powers authority forms, Olson and Robitaille are providing administrative services to Foothill under a contract - in part because former Foothill director Mike Siligo retired effective Monday.

Olson said he expects to see more districts in the region consolidating in coming years as they seek greater efficiency.

"In Calaveras County, we have 11 fire districts, so we have 11 fire boards and 11 fire chiefs," Olson said.

Sant, the Foothill board president, agreed that fewer chiefs can mean more efficient administration.

"We all operate together now," Sant said. "There's no more artificial barriers about the way we approach a scene. The firefighters are being wonderful about this. They are just jazzed and really doing a great job."

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