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S.D. COUNTY WILDFIRES

Plan seeks beefing up arsenal of firetrucks

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Rigs would be put around county

By Craig Gustafson
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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While wildfires were ravaging the county in October, the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department had more than 200 off-duty firefighters ready and willing to battle the blazes.

The problem was, there weren't enough fire engines to put them to work.

To prevent such problems in the future, county Supervisors Ron Roberts and Bill Horn are pushing a plan to buy as many as 50 fire engines and firetrucks to place strategically around the county for emergencies.

Fire officials applauded the idea, but the plan faces an obstacle that has plagued much of the region's firefighting efforts – lack of funds. The trucks and engines would cost between \$15 million and \$50 million.

Supervisors are expected to vote tomorrow to examine funding possibilities, such as a countywide property tax measure or federal grants. The county also has the option of tapping its \$757 million reserve.

The vehicles probably would be under the command of a regional body, such as the Unified Disaster Council that Roberts chairs, and be housed at fire stations. The local fire agency would be responsible for maintaining the vehicles but would use them only in an emergency, under the approval of the regional body.

Roberts said the engines would provide a measure of insurance for fire districts during a calamity.

“You don't have to hire a whole army of new firefighters. You're basically enabling the departments to provide those (they already have). I talked to chiefs in both rural and urban areas and there was a lot of enthusiasm for this idea,” Roberts said.

A typical fire department has only about one-third of its staff working at any given time. The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, for example, had more than 500 off-duty firefighters when the October fires started.

San Diego fire Chief Tracy Jarman said most helped during the fires but about 200 had no rigs to operate.

Jarman, who has said her department needs at least 20 new fire stations and 50 more fire engines, said the plan was a creative way to get firefighters the equipment they need. She also cautioned that more needs to be done.

“This is only one part of the solution. There's not one silver bullet that is going to solve the issues for the region,” Jarman said.

If the engines had been available in October, Jarman said fire officials could have stationed them in neighborhoods in an “anchor and hold” maneuver to protect up to five or six houses at a time. The technique could have saved an additional 250 to 300 homes, she said. The fires destroyed more than 1,700 homes, including more than 300 in Rancho Bernardo.

Fire engines, which have water-pumping equipment, can cost from \$300,000 to \$700,000 each, depending on how they are equipped.

A firetruck, essentially a big toolbox on wheels with an aerial ladder, costs \$950,000 when fully equipped, Jarman said.

The proposal is separate from a plan to create a county fire authority by combining seven fire districts in unincorporated areas. The county has less than half the \$26.5 million needed to create the authority.

Horn opposes the consolidation efforts and has said he would rather spend money on equipment.

■ Craig Gustafson: (619) 293-1399; craig.gustafson@uniontrib.com

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