

LOCAL NEWS

Fire Chiefs Review 2024, Discuss Challenges for 2025



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Photo by Tricia Flaherty



Photo courtesy of Zay Hartigan

Above: Sonoita Elgin Fire District Chief Marc Meredith (left), Acting Patagonia Volunteer Fire and Rescue Chief Zay Hartigan.

Although 2024 was a relatively slow year for fires in eastern Santa Cruz County, [Patagonia Volunteer Fire and Rescue](#) (PVFR) Chief Zay Hartigan and [Sonoita Elgin Fire District](#) (SEFD) Chief Marc Meredith are not complacent about the challenges facing their departments.

“These are economically challenging times,” Chief Hartigan said in a recent interview with the PRT. In a separate interview, Chief Meredith concurred. “The economics of fire service overall are out of control and are particularly challenging for small, rural agencies,” he said.

Meredith sees challenges in the fire service as universal rather than simply local. Competition for staff is ongoing as fewer people elect to work in fire services. Cost of equipment continues to rise, and expectations versus reality continue to trouble many agencies.

“Upkeep, from apparatus to buildings, is complicated by both our weather and our roads,” Meredith said. “Rough roads literally shake things loose on trucks, while sun and heat are hard on our buildings...Our fleet of vehicles is aging, causing increased maintenance costs and the need to replace equipment.”

As of Dec. 10, 2024, SEFD had responded to 698 incidents for the year. Surprisingly, wildland fires had totaled just 20 compared to 82 in 2023—“a trend that cannot last,” Meredith said. “There is no longer a wildfire season, it’s 12 months of the year. Timing has changed, with the largest wildfire this year occurring in October and three roadside fires in one week in December. All of this makes staffing a challenge, as it is impossible to predict needs.”

Hartigan concurred, “We have been very fortunate this past year. The fire season is now year round. In 2024 we had a lot less fire calls, and the only structure fires we had were false alarms. We did provide mutual aid to SEFD, which had more wildfires and motor vehicle accidents than we did. Around 85% of our calls continue to be medical.”

There are currently 35 members of the PVFR, which is an all-volunteer organization. 21 members are classed as firefighters, four are EMTs, and 18 are Basic Life Support CPR-trained.

Four of the members attended the State Fire School in Phoenix this fall. PVFR also hosted the annual Wildland Refresher Course, which they co-led with Coronado National Forest staff. The rest of the training was held in house.

“We are dealing with the challenge of fitting firefighting training into peoples’ lives,” Hartigan said. “Our firefighters are extended in their work lives. Thursday night training works for some people and weekends work better for others, so we are doing both.

“We are also seeing rapid advances in emergency medical services, and we are not as caught up as we would like to be,” he said. “Today there are advances in all emergency services, including fire, rescue, medical and technology usages. We continue to constantly upgrade and update our structure. Our current training officer is devoted to this work.”

Meredith pointed out that SEFD is the first responder for over 50% of Santa Cruz County for ambulance and transport. Currently 50% of the call-outs for SEFD are medical and 5% motor vehicle accidents. The department provides ambulance service to Patagonia.

Both organizations provide mutual aid when requested. Meredith praised cooperation among the various fire agencies and county departments who meet together to train and plan. “Everyone is facing the same challenges, and we all need each other,” he said.

For larger incidents, such as October’s fire, support also comes from other agencies, including Whetstone, Rio Rico, Rincon Valley, Forest Service, BLM, Arizona State and Fort Huachuca. But this does not happen quickly. “We often look at a three-hour response time for things like air support,” Meredith said.

Tourism, the mine, and traffic

“With South 32 ramping up, there is an increase in traffic,” Hartigan said. “We are working with the mine and neighboring agencies updating information. The mine has their own EMT/paramedic, but we do respond to calls to the mine and provide support. We also help route the ambulance—not all the EMTs on the ambulance are local, so we help route them to the scene and provide support. There can be multiple incidents requiring care, and we can provide routing and initiate patient care.”

Hartigan said PVFR is anticipating growth in local mass recreational events in 2025. “We provided care during the Spirit World Bicycle Race this fall, and there are plans for a [new] trail race in March,” he said.

Meredith said that increases in tourism to the area is a trend SEFD is also dealing with.

“Despite public perception, census data reveals that our local population has not grown significantly,” he said. “What has increased are commercial establishments with more wineries and tasting rooms. Increased outdoor tourism in the area brings people from cities who bring with them city expectations and increases in traffic, especially on weekends. While the amount of traffic has increased, so far that has not led to an appreciable increase in the number or severity of accidents.

“While there have not been a significantly larger number of events, more are happening concurrently. For instance a year ago the Patagonia Fall Festival and a major bike event were the same weekend. This really taxes available personnel and equipment.”

Planning for the future

Continuing and increased support for the national Firewise USA program is a local trend Hartigan noted.

“I am very happy to be working with both the Nature Conservancy and Tucson Audubon,” Hartigan said. “Both have stepped up and are helpful and engaged. Audubon has received a \$2.5 million dollar grant over the next five years for fuel reduction programs and road enhancement for their Sonoita Creek property adjacent to the Paton Center. South32 is also engaged, paving the helipad and giving several grants to PVFR for equipment. Borderlands [Restoration Network] is also working on the firewise program on their parcel.”

SEFD is in the middle of implementing a new Strategic Plan, with financial stability as the main goal along with dealing with an aging fleet. Meredith expects that within two years SEFD will need to increase its staffing and/or change its staffing.

“It is difficult to attract and retain firefighters here,” Meredith said. “Some thrive in this rural atmosphere and some don’t. Pay scales are better in larger agencies, as are advancement opportunities. The universal decline in interest in fire service only exacerbates that challenge.”

“Our biggest need is for more EMTs,” Hartigan said. “Like every small community in the country it is hard to find people. We do have a couple of EMTs in the pipeline which makes us happy. We also want more younger members who are fit and physically capable. Right now we are lucky to be getting some good, younger folks, but we always want more.”

Community involvement

“We want to be there for our local people in whatever ways they need, and we are doing all we can to accomplish that,” Meredith said. SEFD supports activities at the Elgin School including Safety Day and a fire drill. They are present with an ambulance and medical staff at the Rodeo, Empire Ranch events, the Fourth of July parade and the Santa Parade.

Hartigan said PVFR, likewise, was looking forward to many community events in Patagonia in 2025. “We staff the high school graduation bonfire and are happy to send staff and trucks to the Career Fair at the school,” he said. “The Steak Fry and the Burger Burn are our big fundraisers. And we love hosting the Fourth of July fireworks and the parade. It is just a big party.”

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