

## COLUMNS

# Notes From SEFD: Fighting a Fire, Part 1



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The Elgin Bridge Fire threatened homes and burned 2,149 acres in May, 2022. File photo by Marion Vendituoli

In 2023 Sonoita-Elgin Fire District (SEFD) responded to 82 wildland fires and several vehicle and structure fires. When a fire breaks out, how are we notified and what happens then?

All 911 calls in Santa Cruz County go to the SCC Sheriff's Office (SCCSO), though calls originating close to the border of Pima or Cochise counties may first go to another Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) and then be transferred to SCCSO. The SCCSO is the PSAP for all dispatches within Santa Cruz County except for the City of Nogales. While SCCSO is able to provide the essential information needed to get SEFD started on a response, their current staffing and infrastructure model limit what we receive.

When a call comes into SEFD, there are typically four firefighters on duty. In some months, there are an additional two seasonal firefighters for wildland fires. The Fire Chief will also respond. The type and size of the fire will determine what other equipment and personnel may be needed. Rarely is it known at the outset just what we are facing, and the team will bring all their gear.

Once on scene, the Incident Commander must make timely decisions about who (more personnel, other agencies, etc.) and what (equipment suited to the type and size of the fire) to call in. (The Incident Commander may be the Chief or a captain and is the person in charge.) In the case of a wildland fire, the Arizona State Dispatch will be notified, and will dispatch State resources and coordinate Federal resources. We often need help from our neighbors and will call on Patagonia, Whetstone and Rincon Valley responders. In turn, we may be called upon by those same agencies to assist in fighting fires outside our district.

The Incident Commander is also tasked with determining if evacuations need to be ordered, but cannot order those. The Sheriff's Office and Office of Emergency Management at SCC are notified and make the actual evacuation notifications, including sending personnel door to door.

None of this happens instantly. In the time it takes to start door-to-door notifications, the need for evacuations may have passed or may have become more urgent. Because the various responders do not all use the same communication systems, delays and errors sometimes happen. In a perfect world, we'd all be on the same system.

If resource needs exceed what is available locally, we make a "Declaration of Need" indicating that we have exhausted all our resources and need more. Both Arizona and the Federal government have fire budgets. Aerial services are provided by private contractors who are paid through either State or Federal budgets.

All this happens at the speed of, well, wildfire, and under conditions of huge stress. In Part Two, we will take an actual fire and walk through how all this played out in real time.

January, 2024 stats: 12 fire calls, 29 EMS, and 18 calls for other services.