



VENTURA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT

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*** News Release ***

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CAL FIRE to Review VCFD Operations on Wildfire That Preceded Mountain Fire

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. – Delivering on a commitment by Fire Chief Dustin Gardner, the Ventura County Fire Department has reached an agreement with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) for an independent review of VCFD's operations during a wildfire that preceded and eventually led to the Mountain Fire.

"CAL FIRE is the nation's leading expert on wildfire operations," Chief Gardner said. "No agency is better prepared to conduct this type of review and provide recommendations to enhance our future work."

The Balcom Fire was started by a tractor clearing brush in the Balcom Canyon area near Somis. Firefighters contained it at 1.8 acres.

Fire investigators determined extreme winds a week later dislodged a previously covered pocket of hot debris from the remains of one of the tractor's tires, gave it the oxygen needed to burn and carried that fire beyond the containment area where it ignited dry vegetation, starting the Mountain Fire.

The Mountain Fire burned nearly 20,000 acres and damaged or destroyed 369 structures.

CAL FIRE will review VCFD's operations and command decisions related to the Balcom Fire, then share its findings and recommendations with the Ventura County Fire Department.

"I applaud Chief Gardner and the Ventura County Fire Department for taking a proactive and transparent approach in reviewing the Balcom Fire. Thoughtful after-action reviews are critical to strengthening operational effectiveness, improving firefighter safety, and reinforcing public trust," said CAL FIRE Director and Fire Chief Joe Tyler.

CAL FIRE Southern Region Chief Mike van Loben Sels and CAL FIRE San Diego Unit and County Fire Chief Tony Mecham will lead the review.

Chief van Loben Sels has 32 years of experience in the fire service, including 16 years on incident management teams and service as incident commander for CAL FIRE Incident Management Team (IMT) 1.

He serves on the CAL FIRE Incident Management Team Committee, is the National Association of State Foresters Western Region Representative and is a cadre member for the Complex Incident Management Course, which teaches advanced incident management throughout the United States. Chief van Loben Sels has also taught on numerous CAL FIRE cadres including Incident Management III, Operations Section Chief, and Incident Commander.

Fire Chief Tony Mecham has more than 38 years of fire and emergency services experience and currently serves as the San Diego Unit Chief and Fire Chief of the San Diego County Fire Protection District. He oversees a countywide fire protection system that includes 42 fire stations, multiple fire centers, aviation facilities, and a workforce of more than 1,000 personnel at peak staffing.

Chief Mecham has extensive wildland and municipal experience, including service in Emergency Command Centers and roles as a Truck Company Captain, Urban Search and Rescue and Water Rescue Team Leader, and Training Chief. He served eight years on CAL FIRE Incident Management Team 6 as an Operations Section Chief and Incident Commander Trainee.

Chief Mecham has been actively involved in emergency medical services, statewide training initiatives, and the planning and implementation of comprehensive fire protection strategies. He holds an associate's degree in fire science, a bachelor's degree in public administration, and a graduate certificate in fire protection administration.

"The Mountain Fire was devastating to our community," Gardner said. "More than a year later, the people directly affected are still working to recover. It's important that we learn from this tragic event and continuously strive to improve for the people we serve."

For more information, please contact the VCFD Public Information Office at (805) 389-9769.

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