

When there's a crash, look to the Forest Service

October 7, 2019



When a vehicle crashes on U.S. Highway 199 east of its intersection with U.S. Highway 101, the California 911 dispatcher may decide to contact an unlikely first-responder – the U.S. Forest Service.

That's because the quickest response may not necessarily be available from Gasquet's all-volunteer Fire Protection District or from the California Highway Patrol.

"We've responded to a variety of accidents, from the worst type of fatalities you can imagine to someone just banging their head or going off the road and they're fine," said Duane Franklin, district firemaster for the National Recreational Area.

Based at the Gasquet Ranger District office at 10600 U.S. Highway 199, the Forest Service's volunteer fire crew is the first to respond to wildlife fires within their district. "We're first-responders for fires, whether it's lightning or human-caused, in the wildland," said Al Goughnour, the assistant firemaster.

"We don't respond to structure fires, but we may be called in an assist role for structure or vehicle fires."

Said Goughnour: “On Sept. 23, a car went into the river and we got there first. Two people were going too fast and launched into the river and got stuck in the vehicle. Luckily, it was low flow this time of year.

“Our guys got there, assessed the situation and kept the people safe until a vehicle tow could get them out and safely up the embankment.”

He added that the crew doesn’t respond to vehicle accident scenes without first receiving a request from the dispatcher ... unless they’re closest on-scene.

According to California Highway Patrol records, there were some 89 vehicle crashes on U.S. 199 between September 2018 and September 2019.

District Ranger Jeff Marszel said a request to assist comes because the National Recreational Area has a five-fighter crew on a Type 3 Engine seven days a week, 8 a.m.-6:30 p.m. At the end of fire season, they’re working five-day weeks, Monday through Friday.

“Because they’re already mobilized, they may get there first. Once the (Gasquet) volunteers show up or CHP shows up, we give that authority back to them,” Marzel said.

“We’ll stay and assist with whatever they need us to do - traffic control, patient handling or extraction.

“I’m really, really proud of work our fire folks do in response to these incidents. Listening on radio to them communicating with dispatch and other organizations, I’m proud of how professional they are,” Marzel said.

Gasquet Fire Chief Nick Karanopoulos also values the contributions of the Forest Service firefighters; he used to be one himself. His volunteer crew at Gasquet’s Fire Protection District numbers more volunteers, at 18, and mans more equipment (a 2,200-gallon tender 750-gallon engine, a 500-gallon Type 3 Wildline Engine, and two rescue trucks). But his crew can’t always be first at the scene.

“If (the Forest Service personnel are) not all gone on fires in the summer, it helps us a lot. Especially in the daytime, because a lot of us have jobs in Crescent City,” Karanopoulos said.

“We do more car accidents than medical responses. The accidents can be for many things - the road, the people. Some people crash and we don’t know why. They just veer off-road for no apparent reason.”

Marzel said the National Recreational Area, when not out fighting fires, is tasked with everything from picking up trash, to timber and fuels clearing and timber management. They also have recreational staff who work the developed campgrounds, fishing guides, and a variety of specialists in wildlife biology, botany and archeology.

The recreational area staff is that varied, Marzel said, because it has 340,000 acres of land to cover. And U.S. 199 goes right down the middle of it, a busy route from southern Oregon carrying travelers often in a hurry to reach the coast.

“Two or three years ago, we had a Fourth of July accident down by the scaling shack,” Franklin recalled.

“That was a fatality, with three vehicles involved: a family of four with a newborn, and an older couple in a

big Dodge truck.

“I came on the scene, first person for the most part. It locked up traffic. It was noon; CHP didn’t get it back to normal until 9 o’clock at night.

“So, some of these accidents are pretty bad.”

CHP Lt. Larry Depee said his officers are fortunate to have the additional help close by in Gasquet. “We work well with all of our allied agencies,” said Depee. “They’re a great group of personnel up there and we appreciate their responses and professionalism.”

After CHP or Gasquet Fire takes over a scene from the forestry firefighters, Goughnour said, the Forest Service still has an important role to play. “Traffic control is one of the biggest things at accidents.

“You have traffic coming in really fast, drivers aren’t paying attention, the roads are slick already. That’s the scariest thing, because of all the bends in the road,” Goughnour said.

“We’ve had problems where vehicles are backed up and people come around the corner and plow into the last vehicle,” Franklin added. “So now, we have another accident.

“And another thing we have to be concerned about is responders’ safety. We get the traffic under control, or people can get run over.”

They both agree the biggest contributors to accidents are speed, wear on tires, distractions, and driving too fast for weather or road conditions. “The room for error is pretty minimal here,” Franklin said.

“It’s a two-lane highway. Once you lose it in the city, you can go off into the emergency lane for a minute and get back in and be okay. But here, you’re off the side of the hill and in the river, or you hit a tree.”