



Humboldt Bay Fire News Release

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June 6, 2017

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Subject : Suspension of Swimmer-Based Water Rescue Program & Correct
Information on Why the Suspension Occurred

Contact : Bill Gillespie, Fire Chief

Humboldt Bay Fire announces to our community that we are forced to suspend the swimmer-based portion of our water rescue program due to a lack of trained, certified personnel to safely support a rescue in the water. This was announced to the department and allied agencies yesterday evening in an internal email sent by me, and seen here:

“Effective immediately, Humboldt Bay Fire must suspend the water-based swimmer portion of our water rescue program.

The overall number of personnel who are trained and certified as active water rescue personnel has declined to a point where we can no longer safely deploy a swimmer into the water and provide a second swimmer to assist, or to rescue the primary swimmer. Some days we have no swimmer on duty at all. This is a result of resignation of some personnel within the program, and lack of interest, time or ability of personnel to join the program and become trained in water rescue.

All water based rescue boards, swim cans, dry suits and wet suits shall be removed from the apparatus immediately, and stored at Station 1 in the mezzanine above the hose racks in the hose room. PFD's, throw bags, and other shore based equipment will continue to be carried on the apparatus and utilized.

Humboldt Bay Fire will continue to respond to water rescue incidents with our current full response level. Our personnel will utilize shore based tactics, including reaching with long handled tools, throwing devices, and floating rescue lines. A full response will also allow personnel to get eyes on a subject in the water, and track their location for assistance and rescue by the Coast Guard, Humboldt County Sheriff's Office, and

Harbor District boat personnel. It will be imperative that these resources are notified immediately upon receipt of a water rescue incident response dispatch.

We have not arrived at this decision without considerable thought and review of the program. I do not take this decision lightly, as over the past 6-7 years the swimmer-based program has been responsible for a number of rescues of persons who ended up in the water due to one circumstance or another. Some of these persons would have drowned had it not been for the swift action of our swimmers. In addition to the responsibility we hold to our community, we also have a responsibility to the safety of our personnel. Placing one swimmer in the water alone places that rescuer in significant risk, especially without a backup rescuer should the first rescuer need assistance.

If our number of trained and certified rescue swimmers increases in the future, we will review the program and determine whether we can again reinstitute a swimmer based rescue program. Until that time, we must remain shore based in our response. If you have questions, please contact myself, Deputy Chief Reynolds, Battalion Chief Hulbert, or your shift Battalion Chief.”

A press release sent out to the media late in the evening on June 5th from Humboldt Bay Firefighters Local 652 President Matt McFarland specified the reason for the suspension as “Humboldt Bay Fire has become unable to fund this program due to continued shortfalls in the budget.” Not only is this statement incorrect, it is false. The water rescue program has continued to be funded to provide for equipment replacement and purchase of new equipment, and training for new and existing members of the water rescue team.

The reason for the suspension remains a lack of trained and certified personnel willing to participate in the program. This is due to resignation of members from the team, and a lack of current new members wishing to become trained and certified. Over the past year, the team has lost five members, with very few showing interest to join. The current program has dropped to a level where only a few members remain, and this makes deploying a swimmer and a backup swimmer nearly impossible on any given day. The decision was the result of safety concerns for our personnel, not from budgetary shortfalls in the program.

The program has been successful over the past 7 years, where a group of team members were trained and equipped to be able to enter the water as a rescue swimmer. A number of successful rescues have been performed, including a few high profile incidents where persons were very close to their end when our swimmers got to the victim. Humboldt Bay Fire will continue to respond to water rescue calls in a shore-based capacity. It is our hope that we can again field a swimmer-based program at some point in the future as personnel show interest in becoming certified.

