

Living

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Fire lookouts honored, but still lose jobs

By CANDACE ATKINS
LIVING PAGE EDITOR

FOUR WOMEN WHO keep a constant and vigilant eye for fires in the local wilderness were honored Tuesday as Firefighters of the Year.

It's too bad, then, that they've lost their jobs as California Department of Forestry lookouts, because of state budget cuts.

Among them, they spot dozens of blazes every fire season, notify emergency units and guide the firefighters to the location — sometimes deep in the wilderness, sometimes dangerously close to residences. Nearly 20 of the fires they reported last year were "first calls," blazes they spotted first.

The women, who received pink slips earlier this year, received congratulatory plaques Tuesday in ceremonies in the Board of Supervisors chambers at the County Governmental Center in Santa Cruz. They're the first women to receive the honor, said lookout Melodee Pope-Keverline. Members of the Department of Forestry and local ranger units vote from a list of nomination submitted by the membership.

"It was a total surprise, I'll guarantee that," Pope-Keverline said. She added that the closures of her lookout at Mt. Bielwaski and the lookout at Eagle Rock weren't such a surprise. In the last four of her 14 years as a lookout, state budget tightening has resulted in the closure of other lookouts.

Last year, there was a threat the two local towers would be shut down, but when the fire season arrived, the four women — three of them Midcounty residents — still had their jobs, which run four to six months,

depending on the fire hazards. But as of Oct. 13, both were closed permanently. The only hope of saving the lookouts would be reinstitution by the state.

Eagle Rock is at the northern end of Empire Grade and Bielwaski lookout is in the southern end of San Mateo County. Both oversee Santa Cruz County.

Lookout Isa Dempsey, who has been on the job for five seasons, said she's reported fires as far south as Moss Landing. The lookouts provide panoramic views of parts of San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. Lookouts also take temperatures five times daily for reporting to the National Weather Service, climbing nine flights of stairs each trip. Lookout staff members' work hours are dawn to dusk and they're on call around the clock.

Some firefighting personnel argue that the lookouts, which have been in operation for some 50 years, are obsolete, that today's car telephones and 911 emergency line enable private citizens who spot a blaze to report it almost as quickly as the lookouts.

This is true only to a certain extent, Pope-Keverline said. The problem with this reasoning, she said, is that people aren't trying to spot fires the way the CDF lookouts are. Further, when fires are in remote areas, it could be days, and the destruction of hundreds of acres, before they're discovered.

And the reporting method of a private citizen is less accurate and complete than CDF lookouts. CDF lookouts can give an exact location, they can tell by the color of the smoke and how it billows what kind of fire it is, and from their vantage point,



CDF fire lookouts named Firefighters of the Year, from left, Susan Maurer, Jill Giesel, Isa Dempsey

and Melodee Pope-Keverline. The women were honored in spite of the lookouts' closures.

they can tell how it's spreading, Pope-Keverline said.

"A lot of time, I'll have to guide firefighters to the fire," she said. "The public will say (to firefighters) something like 'It's over there.' They don't know if it's a chimney fire or a brush fire. We're trained to know. The 911 doesn't do the job always."

The women make about \$10,000 each per season working 24-hour shifts on a rotating three days on, four days off schedule. The cost of their salaries is probably recouped every season in the false alarms they stop, without even considering the fires they report, they said.

It costs a fortune to send out firefighters in vehicles, and air-

craft expenses cost \$300 per hour, Pope-Keverline said.

But when private citizens see smoke and report it, it must be investigated. Checking with lookouts, firefighters were, until now, able to identify drifting smoke from fires hundreds of miles away, smoke from chimneys and legal burns, rather than have equipment dispatched to find out the same thing communicated by radio or telephone.

On the other hand, a single fire can cost many times the women's annual combined salary, Pope-Keverline said.

"We prove this every summer," she said. "Last year, we spotted a fire right by a struc-

ture. There were people around but nobody saw it. We saved two million-dollar homes."

"The savings (from cutting the lookout jobs) is not that much," Dempsey said.

Both Pope-Keverline and Dempsey said they hope their award will help their efforts to restore their jobs by impressing on state budget-makers of the lookouts' value and service.

They have the backing of Senator Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, who has been working for months to get funding restored, and from State Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey, who has

told the lookouts that he's also working to save the lookouts from what is now a permanent closure. The women may have news as early as next month.

Pope-Keverline's father, fire captain Ed Pope, was named Firefighter of the Year in 1989 while working as a dispatcher. She said she's a "forestry brat," and the thought of losing a needed — and loved — position is almost too painful to consider.

"You either love this job or you hate it," she said. "For all of us, the lookout job comes first. None of us is prepared emotionally not to go back. We still have such hope."

Kurt Ellison