



COUNTY OF MONTEREY CAO Weekly Report

In This Edition:

- > Kathleen Lee keeps community informed, provides advocacy and support during Soberanes Fire

SPECIALREPORT



Kathleen Lee presents certificates of appreciation to members of the CalFire Type 1 Incident Command Team as the Soberanes Fire rages in August.

County Notes

- > Check local election results on the [Elections Department website](#).

Kathleen Lee: Champion for County, Residents during Soberanes Fire

There are many county employees who worked long, exhausting hours during the Soberanes Fire in support of firefighting efforts and residents who were affected by this disaster. But few were in the unique position of Kathleen Lee, Chief of Staff for District 5, which serves the area devastated by the fire.

What does a community need from its government at a time like this? Support, information, assurance and advocacy - all things Lee delivered as the fire raged.

“Throughout the entire Soberanes emergency, Ms. Lee’s dedication was extraordinary,” said County Administrative Officer Lew Bauman. “Kathleen quickly gained the trust of the first responder teams, and served as a key liaison between elected and appointed officials, fire and sheriff command teams, and affected residents throughout the greater Carmel Valley and Big Sur Coast regions. Her contribution to the emergency response effort exemplifies all of our great county staffs’ leadership and commitment to the well-being and safety of our residents.”

Lee shared her ‘behind the scenes’ story of serving a community during a time of disaster and her thoughts on how the county came together to serve a community battered by one of the most expensive fires in local and state history.



Q. Where were you when the Soberanes Fire broke out? Since the fire started on July 22nd, what has been your role for the county and residents?

A. I was actually in the back country of Palo Corona Regional Park, which backs up to Garrapata State Park where the fire started. We watched as helicopters aggressively worked the fire, but it was clear by mid-afternoon that this was going to be a bigger fire.



Helping residents after a fire is something Lee has done many times as 5th District Chief of Staff. Here she walks through a burn area after the Tassajara Fire last year (above) and talks with residents while emergency vehicles stage on Highway 1 during the Pfeiffer Fire in 2013 (left).

I spent much of those first few days on the side of Highway 1, talking with CalFire crews, constituents and law enforcement personnel trying to relay the needs of my constituents into the Incident Command structure and get information out to our residents to counteract rumors and inaccurate information.

Through the duration of the fire (more than 45 days), I would attend the 7:00 a.m. fire

briefings, serve as a liaison between the local, state and federal agencies that were working on the fire and often finishing the day with an evening community briefing from Big Sur, Cachagua and Carmel Valley. By always being present, the changing staff at Incident Command always knew that I could link them to the correct people at the County or serve as an advocate for them with the local, state and federal elected officials and the residents knew that I would be there for them.

Q. This isn't your first disaster experience helping Big Sur with disasters. What makes the Soberanes Fire different?

A. The Soberanes Fire has been challenging because of its duration, most disasters are much more short-term in nature. Soberanes started on state property, so CalFire was the lead in the Incident Command, but then the fire entered the Los Padres National Forest, so the US Forest Service became the Incident Command team. Each agency has its own style, mission and goals.

Since the fire has gone on so long, we have had multiple Incident Command teams. I had to get used to a new team and a new personality for each team and they had to get to know me. The size of the Soberanes Fire was also daunting – at one point threatening communities the length of Carmel Valley, the Carmel Highlands and into Palo Colorado. Those were scary days and nights.

Q. Describe what a typical day was like during the height of the fire.

A. The typical schedule during that time was that my day started before 6:15 a.m. and ended around 11:00 p.m. or later.

During the 7:00 a.m. daily fire briefing, that was my opportunity to listen, to find out the plan for each team in the various areas. Would Carmel Valley be the top priority or would it be Big Sur, why would one area get that level of attention and not the other? What equipment would be going where? How would that movement of people and equipment impact Carmel Valley Road, Highway 1 and schools?

Remember when Car Week happened in the middle of the fire? I worked closely with the CHP liaisons, Sheriff, fire and hospitality to have conversations about how to ensure that the firefighting efforts were not impacted by the huge influx of visitors and large trucks that carried millions of dollars' worth of rare automobiles. We were able to make small adjustments that had a big impact in that moment, for example, we adjusted the route of one of the road tours to not conflict with shift changes of the fire personnel.

Our office coordinated multiple details, but most importantly, we dealt with information. How to get medicine to people who stayed in an evacuation watch area, how to coordinate large animal evacuation, how to get the message out that businesses were still open, or where residents could go for resources. Our office scoured social media to ensure we knew the issues residents were dealing with, challenges that they were facing and then responded so that they had accurate information. Our top priority was



At the Soberanes fire camp, Lee (center) speaks to Congressman Sam Farr (right) and Major General David Baldwin of the California National Guard (left).

to do anything we could do to ease anxiety for our residents who were in the middle of a very stressful event.

Q. The work to help Big Sur resident has transitioned to recovery. How does that change the work you do for residents?

A. We are now focused on dealing with the after-effects of the fire, namely, too much rain bringing debris flows. Debris flows are rivers of mud that can travel for miles at high rates of speed. After the 2008 Basin Complex Fires, we had debris flows move through Big Sur that carried redwoods, boulders and cars. We are focused on telling people in advance of rain events what areas might be impacted by a debris flow so they can leave. You can stay behind to fight a fire but you cannot stop a debris flow. We are also focused on the rebuilding of those structures that were lost, helping folks navigate through the complicated process of that aspect of recovery.

Q. How do you view the needs for recovery for Big Sur and the role of the Fifth District Office in that?

A. Recovery for Big Sur is challenging because we won't know for certain exactly what will be needed for years to come.



Lee listens to a Big Sur resident's concerns at a recovery information session.

Post-fire experts have weighed in with the engineering fixes, so we advocate for more money to help fund those fixes. We meet with the community to explain why certain roads will be closed for the winter, to understand what they will need if Highway 1 is closed due to a mudslide. We've met with Caltrans and RMA-Public Works to talk about clearing culverts and removing dead trees. We have facilitated thousands of county work hours on behalf of the residents impacted by the Soberanes Fire.

I cannot say thank you enough times to all of the county employees who have worked so hard on behalf of the residents impacted by the Soberanes Fire. I am grateful that we live in a place, in a country, where people are so willing to step up and help others in times of crisis.

I am so proud of the work that my team did for the residents of the Fifth District, from Supervisor Potter always making community briefings, to Bryan Flores posting information online and relaying resident's concerns to Jayne Mohammadi working to ensure that the day-to-day operations of the office were handled so that we could focus

on the ever-changing needs of our constituents.

For all the sleepless nights and 16 hours days, that is the lesson that I take away. We are surrounded by great county employees and amazing public servants.