



# NEWS



## News Headlines 1/24/2018

- Why was John Hawkins removed as Riverside County fire chief?

## **Why was John Hawkins removed as Riverside County fire chief?**

**Jeff Horseman, The Press-Enterprise**

Posted: January 23, 2018 at 4:32 p.m.

The decision to remove John Hawkins as Riverside County's fire chief came from the state Cal Fire agency, a county supervisor said in the wake of a move that surprised county elected officials and rank-and-file firefighters.

Cal Fire, which has a longstanding contract to provide firefighting services in Riverside County, desired a change in leadership and wasn't acting in response to any scandal, Supervisor Kevin Jeffries said.

Citing the confidentiality of personnel matters, Cal Fire Deputy Chief Scott McLean on Monday, Jan. 22, declined to elaborate on why Cal Fire removed Hawkins from the department he led for almost 12 years. The move became public Friday but was made sometime earlier in the week.

Hawkins was not fired or demoted, McLean said; he remains a Cal Fire employee with the rank of unit chief. McLean did not know what Hawkins' future assignment would be.

Hawkins, who earned \$156,000 in base pay in 2017, did not respond to a voicemail Monday seeking comment. The decision to remove Hawkins and replace him with Deputy Chief Daniel Talbot on an interim basis caught Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley off-guard. Ashley said he learned of the move when Hawkins called him last week.

"I thought it was a joke," Ashley said. "I thought he was kidding around. He was, of course, very upset about it." Ashley, first elected supervisor in 2002, praised Hawkins' management.

"He's been a wonderful chief. I rank him up there with the best we've ever had," Ashley said. "We're sad to see this happen. We don't understand. Cal Fire had their reasons."

Replacing Hawkins "(was) not something that we were contemplating doing or even thinking about," Ashley added.

A closed-session item on the fire chief had been on the board's agenda for its regular Tuesday meeting. In the open session, supervisors praised Hawkins.

"Cal Fire made the decision that it was time for new leadership," said Jeffries, a former volunteer fire captain. "There was no scandalous events that occurred, nothing exciting like that. It was just a leadership change that Cal Fire felt was important and we were kind of kept in the loop a little bit. But it was a decision of Cal Fire."

Supervisor Chuck Washington said his office is making plans to honor Hawkins at a later date.

Hawkins, who came to the county as a deputy chief in 2004, took over as chief on Aug. 1, 2006. The Esperanza fire broke out that October in the mountains south of Banning, killing five U.S. Forest Service firefighters. It was blamed on arson committed by Raymond Lee Oyler, who was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death.

In recent years, Hawkins has had to deal with red ink like the rest of county government. Faced with a budget shortfall and responding to supervisors' request for cuts, Hawkins in March 2017 offered a series of cost-cutting options, from closing the Poppet Flats fire station to billing patients served by Cal Fire during medical calls.

Supervisors eventually moved ahead with some of Hawkins' suggestions, such as doing away with a hazardous materials team, but avoided closing Poppet Flats and the more drastic cuts. The union representing Riverside County firefighters strongly objected to a plan, which was shelved, to convert some three-firefighter engines to two-firefighter, quick-response units.

Mike Alvarado, Riverside district vice president for Cal Fire Local 2881, said firefighters learned of the decision to replace Hawkins on Friday afternoon.

"We were honored to have Chief Hawkins," Alvarado said. "He guided us through the times of growth and then through the times where we were hit by (budget woes)."

<https://www.pe.com/2018/01/23/why-was-john-hawkins-removed-as-riverside-county-fire-chief/>