From the Chief

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2022 edition of Big Sur Fire’s Responder Newsletter, a valuable resource for all residents, visitors and supporters of this dynamic organization and community. As a proud member of this exceptional fire department for nearly 15 years, I still feel as excited and lucky to be here as I did on my very first day many years ago. Big Sur Fire was established in 1974 to protect the lives and property of those who called Big Sur home. The volunteers originally formed up as members of the community who just wanted to help. Today, our mission holds true and is lived every day by the selfless group of first responders who continue to employ those same principles. When emergencies strike, no matter how difficult, we answer the call with a spirit of teamwork, respect and integrity!

My first priority is the health and safety of the first responders and ensuring they return home safely at the end of the day in terms of mind, body and spirit. We achieve this on scene by having a safety-oriented mindset; being properly trained and equipped; and through effective risk management. Back at the fire station is equally important. Our first responders have access to services such as a gym and peer support which are aimed at reducing the potential for post-traumatic stress. Striking a balance with seemingly endless and complex call outs; intensifying training programs; advancement in firefighting tools and equipment; greater emphasis on fire prevention and public education; as well as increased operating costs have all become our greatest challenges and opportunities as we look forward.

Our fire department and community have witnessed a transformation in recent years. As such, we continue to adapt and refine our services and capabilities with an increased focus on communication, collaboration and inclusion. We intend to complete a community risk assessment and strategic plan through self-evaluation and community input in the coming year. These processes will allow Big Sur Fire to move forward with clear and attainable goals representing and integrating community-identified priorities. I am very proud to lead this dedicated group of community members that share a vision and strive for excellence in providing the highest level of service we can to the residents and guests of Big Sur. On behalf of the entire organization, I sincerely thank you. Without your support our ability to provide this essential service would not be possible.

Matt Harris
Fire Chief

From the Chair

Community. Big Sur is as unique as any one community could ever be and Big Sur Fire shines in its uniqueness. As we approach our 49th year, some things change and others remain the same. Even as the world moves faster and faster, the one thing that never changes is the dedication and passion of the members of Big Sur Fire. Every one of us is here because we believe in the mission to serve and protect the community. 2022 flew by as we faced the annual challenges of maintaining a nonprofit, volunteer fire department. It takes a community of motivated and talented individuals to support this dedicated team, which is Big Sur Fire. Thanks to the supporters of BSF and our team of volunteers, we were able to continue our health and wellness program, and we achieved our goal of opening a gym at Station One. Building a new fire station along the south coast is another goal for Big Sur Fire and this past year we have taken some exciting steps in that direction. Having a strong presence on the south coast for our firefighters and apparatus will further increase protection for our whole community. Stay tuned for more news in 2023.

As our firefighters balance the ever increasing hours of training and responding, the members of the Board stand behind them, looking inward and outward. It has been a privilege working with my fellow board members supporting this amazing group of individuals. They sacrifice their time and energy to serve their friends and neighbors as they go above and beyond. Our years of operating as a nonprofit volunteer fire department has given us a legacy we all stand on. We are thankful and humbled to follow in the footsteps of those who have served before us.

Big Sur Fire is committed to protecting Big Sur and will continue to be there as long as we have the support of our community. Be it contributions, volunteering at events, becoming a first responder or serving on the Board of Directors. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do.

From all of us at Big Sur Fire, to all of you, as we enter our 49th year, it is an honor and privilege to serve.

Barbara Sexton
Board Chair

Meet Our Firefighters

Thomas Leahy
Joined in 2013

Where were you born? In a small town outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

What brought you to Big Sur and how long have you lived here? I came in January 2011 as a work scholar at Esalen and never left.

What do you love most about living in Big Sur? Being surrounded by the wilderness of the landscape, hugged by the ocean and cradled by the mountains, it felt like coming home. Being able to wake up and breathe the salt air is healing while also being challenging. The close knit community and small town feel is also nostalgic of my upbringing.

When did your love of firefighting & emergency response come to you and how did you discover it? Looking back, even as a kindergartner I was the catalyst. BSF offered an academy afterwards and I immediately signed up.

What about BSF do you love most about living in Big Sur? It’s an honor to show up at a neighbor’s home or on the side of the highway to assist someone in need.

Of all the calls you have responded to in the past year, is there one that stands out to you as most significant? There was a call out to Salmon Creek where someone fell down a ravine. They had been trying to call for hours but didn’t have service. When we finally received the call we were picked up by a helicopter and shuttled into the backcountry. We provided medical attention while hoisting her out of the creek with the helicopter. Being able to take a helicopter into the backcountry to assist a fallen hiker and provide them medical treatment is not something you face on a daily basis. On the other side, there are times when you try to help someone that may not want your help. Those calls can be extremely challenging in a different way.

What will it be? As we evolve as a department, we stay community based.

In your opinion, what are some of the challenges facing Big Sur Fire today? The influx of tourism and aversion of Big Sur mixed with climate change.

Can you recall an outstanding moment during a training? Being able to navigate through all the CDC guidelines during COVID while bringing in new recruits.

If you had only one message to the Big Sur community, what would it be? Gratitude for welcoming me into the community. Trust in Big Sur Fire that we will have your back. If you had only one message to the visitors to Big Sur, what would it be? Take the Big Sur Pledge.

If you had only one wish for BSF, what would it be? As we evolve as a department, we stay community based.

If you had only one message to Big Sur Fire today? The influx of tourism and aversion of Big Sur mixed with climate change.

What does your role in BSF entail? In the past, I was the Station 3 Captain but now I’m a Board Member, committee chairperson, EMT and first responder.

What about BSF do you enjoy the most? Being able to give back to this community, providing a safety net when someone is having their worst day and helping to protect a land I love. The honor of service, to provide comfort or life saving measures feeds me. The comradery I’ve built with my fellow firefighters is another important aspect. Being on a fire at night feels surreal. It connects you back to an ancient time when there was a different type of respect and stewardship for the land. These are some of the magical moments I’ve had as part of BSF.

How does it feel responding to emergency calls right here in your own community? It’s an honor to show up at a neighbor’s home or on the side of the highway to assist someone in need.

If you had one wish for BSF, what would it be? As we evolve as a department, we stay community based.

If you had only one message to Big Sur Fire today? The influx of tourism and aversion of Big Sur mixed with climate change.

Can you recall an outstanding moment during a training? As part of our training we have to train for all scenarios. We were training for cliff rescues at McWay Falls and I was the first one on the beach. Getting to catch the sunset in that cove was another surreal moment.

Looking back on the past year, what of significance do you feel Big Sur Fire has accomplished? Be able to navigate through all the CDC guidelines during COVID while bringing in new recruits.

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Meet Our Firefighters

Fabian Perez
Joined in 2015

How did you discover your love of firefighting?
As a kid I thought of being a firefighter like any kid does. I never thought I would be a firefighter for Big Sur Fire, but was encouraged to join by former Chief Karstens. Once I started coming to training and meeting the rest of the membership, they were very encouraging, and I realized this was something I liked doing and could see myself doing for a while.

What do you do as a career outside of BSF?
I am transitioning to that and finding a new balance. So I am transitioning to that and finding a new balance.

What made you decide to pursue a career in firefighting?
I wanted to try something new and start a new chapter in my life. I like being a firefighter here in Big Sur and decided to give it a try as a career.

What does your role in BSF entail?
Primarily as an EMT and firefighter responding to calls, participating in training, and engaging with committees.

What about BSF do you enjoy the most?
It is very simple—I love to be helpful in an emergency setting. This can be attributed to the variety and unique skills we get to train on as members of BSF. A lot of our operations are shaped by the terrain we live in, providing us with specialized resources like the UTV program. I love the camaraderie too.

How does it feel responding to emergency calls in your own community?
I’m here for the community, so being able to respond to emergencies right here in Big Sur where I live is what I enjoy the most.

Being in your hometown, you are more attached. Especially if you know it’s a resident, it’s meaningful to know you’re helping a friend or neighbor. If it’s someone you know, responding to damages or bad accidents affects you differently than if it was a stranger.

Sarah Shashaani
Joined in 2016

Where were you born and when did you first come to Big Sur?
I was born in Michigan. I came to Big Sur for the first time in 2013 with a plan to stay for 8 days and have now lived here for 3 years.

What do you love most about living in Big Sur?
The rugged and romantic landscape that shows itself differently every day.

How did you discover your love of firefighting?
After finding myself in a few emergency situations and wanting to help but not having the skills to do so, I started pursuing some basic medical training. Living in Big Sur, wildfires are a part of our lives and I found myself wanting to be able to participate in a more direct way aside from doing fire clearance. A neighbor encouraged me to join BSF and I quickly fell in love with the training process, skill building, and being a participant in emergency responses throughout the community.

What do you do as a career outside of BSF?
Currently I am working for Big Sur Historical Society and at the Big Sur Bakery. I actually also just started working as a seasonal firefighter for Cal Fire BEU so I am transitioning to that and finding a new balance.

If you had only one message to the visitors to Big Sur, what would it be?
Read the signs where you go and obey them. Plan ahead and familiarize yourself with where you’re going. Don’t take risks. If you risk yourself, you’re also risking the lives of the first responders.

In your opinion, what are some of the challenges facing Big Sur Fire today?
Recruiting and training new firefighters. There is a higher standard for people to get their FF1 certification, and it’s challenging to find people who can commit the time and effort it takes. The time commitment that BSF requires is challenging, especially trying to balance it with your personal life.

What do you feel Big Sur Fire has accomplished in the last year?
We established acting captain rotations, giving members an opportunity to act as captain for a short time at their respective stations. It gives us all an equal chance for growth within the organization. We also added three more FF1 certified firefighters to our roster and completed many large scale apparatus repairs.

If you had only one message to the visitors to Big Sur, what would it be?
Soak it up! And put the phone down.

If you had one wish for BSF, what would it be?
Continue to fortify, grow and lift each other up.

In your opinion, what are some of the challenges facing Big Sur Fire today?
Big Sur Fire today?

What do you feel Big Sur Fire has accomplished in the last year?

How does it feel responding to emergency calls in your own community?
I absolutely love the community element of BSF; my neighbors showing up quickly in emergency situations is part of what inspired me to join. You want to do everything you can for someone on their worst day. I’m impressed by our team’s ability to work together collaboratively and utilize each individual’s local knowledge and expertise on calls.

Is there a specific call you’ve responded to this past year that stands out to you as most significant?
There are many, but the PG&E workers we rescued on Anderson where they got lost, benighted, and exhausted stands out. They couldn’t continue hiking down the burn scar. We cut a trail from the highway through the mountainside to get to them and then cut them out.

What do you feel Big Sur Fire has accomplished in the last year?

There are so many different areas of growth I have witnessed. Our trainings cover everything from UTV and drone programs to cliff rescue and helicopter hoist rescue. Everyone in the organization is constantly expanding their skill set on an individual level, from getting FF1s, to becoming EMTs, taking an acting captain rotation, or being trained to be a duty officer. On a daily level, given how full everyone’s life is, our ability to continue to provide efficient and effective emergency response in our community is also a significant and ongoing accomplishment. The team continues to be a critical resource in the community, everything from the Colorado Fire to medicals to overnight 10 mile carryouts from the back country.
Cost to Outfit a Firefighter

Specialized safety gear, referred to as “personal protective equipment,” or “PPE,” is required for any emergency whether it be a fire, rescue or medical callout. To properly outfit one firefighter costs over $25,000 in gear alone. Our gear gets heavy use during the course of its life and must be replaced on regular intervals. While we do receive some grant funding specifically for fire, rescue and medical PPE, your support is critical so we can continue to gear up safely and effectively for any emergency in Big Sur.

Helmet and Hood $400
Breathing Apparatus and Mask $8,500
Air Bottle $2,400
Jacket $1,800
Gloves $80
Pants $1500
Boots $250

Total Cost for Structure Gear $15,080

Big Sur Fire Rescue Operations

Being a first responder for Big Sur Fire often involves more than just fighting fires. While technical rescues on average only make up 10% of our call volume they are often the most complex and difficult calls. Responding in Big Sur requires a dedicated team of firefighters with specialized equipment, a high degree of skill and a significant amount of time to execute. Without the proper training and equipment, our firefighters would not be able to perform their mission.

Additional Costs
Gear Bag $150
Wildland Gear $1,700
Rescue Gear $1,200
Radio $8,000
Medical Bag $500

The Many Faces of Big Sur Fire

Big Sur Fire has been operating as a volunteer fire department for 48 years and it’s through no shortage of thanks to many helping hands. From the firefighters on the ground, to our admin staff, advisors and board members behind the scenes, and to the community members who support us endlessly. These are just a few of the many faces of Big Sur Fire and we simply can’t thank all of you enough.
Does becoming a firefighter interest you? If you answered yes, then it’s a path guaranteed to challenge and fulfill you! Big Sur Fire will be conducting another firefighter academy beginning in February 2023. Being a firefighter can be demanding and dangerous, but it also provides an opportunity to meaningfully contribute back to the community and potentially save lives and property.

If conducting rescues or fighting fires isn’t quite for you but still have a desire to serve, there are other ways to support our mission such as volunteering at one of our many community events or joining our Board of Directors. Both are valuable ways to contribute to our nonprofit organization and this community.

For more information on how you can join us please visit bigsurfire.org, follow us on Facebook and Instagram or call our office at (831) 667-2113. We truly appreciate the decades of support YOU have provided which has enabled us to operate as a nonprofit, volunteer fire department.

Join Us in 2023 for our Fire Academy

The Big Sur Fire Team

Operational Members
Matt Harris, Fire Chief
Jeannie Alexander, Medical Captain

Engine 7831
Rafael Garcia, Captain (Acting)
Lyle Southall, Engineer
Jim Betts, Firefighter
Crosby Lovell, Firefighter
Martin Palafox, Firefighter
Fabian Perez, Firefighter

Engine 7852
Jon Knight, Captain
Jeff Carmichael, Engineer
Mat Jenkins, Firefighter
Sarah Shashaani, Firefighter
Anthony Perez, Probationary Firefighter

Engine 7853
Mike Handy, Captain (Acting)
Thomas Leahy, Firefighter
Caleb Chesser, Firefighter

Joel DePola, Firefighter
Torri Tabor, Probationary Firefighter

Board of Directors
Barbara Sexton, Chair
Douglas Drummond, Vice Chair
Shana Kropp, Treasurer
Helen Handshy, Secretary
Alicia Hahn
John Kraszniewicz
Thomas Leahy
Teye Morgenrath
MaryAnn Vasconcellos

Advisory Board
Bill Doolittle
James J. Hill III
Bob Pavey
Ed Penhoet
Nancy Schoendorf
Frank Pinney
Marcus Foster

Administrative Personnel
Angela Padilla, Assistant Administrator
Jaci Pappas, Bookkeeper
Santana Ponce, Quartermaster
A Request for Support

With your help, Big Sur Fire will remain prepared and equipped to provide emergency services whenever and wherever you may need it.

As a region, Big Sur enjoyed a return to normal this year. 2022 saw the global pandemic begin to subside, community events started happening more regularly, steady visitor use and as one would expect, lots of 911 calls for emergency services. Big Sur Fire responded to 260 emergency incidents along our coast in 2021. Our firefighters put out 15 fires, carried out 19 patients needing rescue, intervened with 10 illegal campfires, answered 103 medical emergency calls, responded to 42 vehicle accidents and 71 other types of emergency incidents.

As a rural community in an unincorporated area of Monterey County, most of our land is State and National Forest. That means we don't have the broad tax base to pay for full time staffed fire stations that other tourist communities rely upon. For that reason we continue to reach out for help from you to fund this important community service. As volunteer firefighters, we are your neighbors; spouses, moms, dads, sisters and brothers, caretakers and hospitality workers, builders and weekend warriors.

Please consider making a donation and help fund our increasing operational costs so we can continue to provide these vital emergency services to all of Big Sur.

2021 Incidents Breakdown

- Medical: 40%
- Vehicle Accidents: 16%
- Other: 27%
- Rescues: 7%
- Illegal Campfires: 4%
- Fires: 6%

Our Mission

Our mission is to provide dependable fire protection and emergency services to all of Big Sur with a spirit of teamwork, respect and integrity.

The Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade is a nonprofit IRS Code 501c3 organization, tax-exempt number 94-2840361.