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FOR RELEASE THE WEEK OF
March 27, 2023

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Eastern Sierra Emergency Workers Recognized

Emergency workers from Inyo and Mono counties were recently recognized for their outstanding efforts responding to the storms that wreaked havoc on the Eastern Sierra earlier this month.

Inyo County Acting Lieutenant Nate Derr, Emergency Services Manager Mikaela Torres, and Sheriff's Public Information Officer Carma Roper, along with Mono County Disaster Preparedness/Prevention Specialist Bri Chappell-McGovern and Sgt. Brent Gillespie, were presented with honorary challenge coins for their dedication, leadership, and hard work during the emergency event that began March 7. The coins are unique to CalFire Incident Management Team 2 and were presented during the team's pre-demobilization dinner on March 22 to individuals who made an impactful contribution to response/incident management.

The San Bernardino-based Incident Management Team 2 arrived in Bishop on March 8 and transitioned out on March 24. The team deployed at the request of both Inyo and Mono counties, who had entered a Unified Command and opened a joint Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in advance of the warm atmospheric river that arrived in the Eastern Sierra on March 9. The storm, one of a series of severe weather events to hit the Eastern Sierra since January, brought significant rain to lower elevations and snowfall in the higher elevations and caused widespread flooding, road closures, avalanches, and other hazards. It was followed by a milder atmospheric river on March 14.

The team was requested to ensure Inyo and Mono counties' EOC and response efforts ran smoothly and were maintained at a level of functionality necessary to support both emergency and daily business. Teams like Incident Management Team 2 are the same ones who are called upon to manage large-scale wildfires across the country and are adept at standing up resources and operational infrastructure that standardizes communication and approaches to management.

"This was one of the best experiences in my professional career," said Torres. "I'm grateful the Incident Management Team was able to help Inyo-Mono counties not only manage this incident but also to share their tools and knowledge with our team. Throughout the incident, they helped us identify solutions to challenges we were presented with, while maintaining a focus on collaboration with all key partners and stakeholders across counties. The IMT typically deploys to and helps manage fire-related incidents – this was their first storm-flood-avalanche related incident – so it was great to grow through this unique and challenging disaster together."

At the event's peak, there were an estimated 500 individuals assigned to response efforts, including 36 CalFire firefighters with Incident Management Team 2, 330 equipment operators brought in via the California Office of Emergency Services for both Inyo and Mono counties, and approximately 27 staff members from Inyo and Mono assigned specifically to the EOC. This is in addition to the dozens of personnel from both counties working in the field to provide emergency response to floods, avalanches, hazardous snow loads, road closures, and other threats

to life and property, including Inyo County's Public Works, Emergency Services, Sheriff's, Administration, Health & Human Services, Information Services, and Risk Management departments.

Lt. Derr and Sgt. Gillespie worked on Operations, Torres and Chappell-McGovern were responsible for Planning and Intelligence, and Roper led Public Information in Inyo.

For nearly three weeks, 24 hours a day, personnel worked to provide support for life and safety of the public, first responders, and essential workers; supporting the protection of critical infrastructure; maintaining road conditions to support access and egress of emergency personnel and the public; maintaining communication between cooperators, stakeholders, and internal team members; and ensuring coordinated, timely, and accurate dissemination of public information.

In an expression of gratitude for staff's efforts, CAO Greenberg said, "I am deeply impressed by the level of commitment, performance, and professionalism of all Inyo County staff who worked in support of this incident, especially those who were tasked to staff the EOC. It is truly inspiring to see this level of commitment to supporting our community – it is deeply appreciated and makes an impact."

Greenberg declared a local emergency on March 7 in his capacity as Director of Emergency Services. Among other, more immediate threats, the declaration cites spring runoff projected to be 800,000 to 1 million acre-feet of water in the Owens River drainage – more than double the normal runoff amount of around 412,000 acre-feet. With the weather warming each day, Inyo and Mono officials and other local agencies are ramping up efforts to prepare for the deluge.

To date, emergency responders have removed more than 35,000 tons of snow from local communities.

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