

STATE OFFICIALS EYE HUALAPAI FIRE DISTRICT
FIRE MARSHALL RESCINDS INSPECTION AUTHORITY
BY DAVE HAWKINS
THE STANDARD

State officials have taken some level of interest in allegations that Chief Wayne Eder abused his position to coerce the Kingman Unified School District (KUSD) to purchase about \$3,800 of fire hose for the Hualapai Valley Fire District. The allegations come from Local President Robert Borker and the United Professional Firefighters union with members throughout the Kingman area and Golden Valley.

Borker detailed union findings in a presentation to the KUSD board last week, prompting the board to direct staff to request communication or a meeting with the fire district board. Borker said he and other firefighters were subsequently contacted by an Attorney General's Office investigator who requested additional information.

State Fire Marshall John Rowlinson, meanwhile, said his office has also been made aware of the allegations. Rowlinson also said his agency essentially has no regulatory authority over the fire district or Chief Eder.

Rowlinson explained, however, that the State Fire Marshall's Office has had a "gentlemen's agreement" with the fire district since 1998 which delegates to the district the responsibility of conducting annual inspections of schools and county and state owned buildings within the district. He said the union's fire hose allegations perked interest given the fire district's inspection duties involving the school district.

Rowlinson said during a November 9 interview that the agency was considering visiting Kingman to determine whether the Hualapai District had been conducting inspections in satisfactory fashion. Despite that assertion, Rowlinson issued a November 8 letter to Chief Eder reverting inspection authority back to the state.

"Effective immediately this office will resume the inspection of public and private schools, state and county owned buildings within the jurisdiction for the Hualapai Valley Fire District," the letter stated. "This office will seek to review all plans and specifications for new construction, remodeling, alterations and additions to state, county and public school buildings and grounds."

Rowlinson's letter offered no explanation for the revocation and reversion of inspection authority. During the November 9 interview Rowlinson said the State Fire Marshall's office had been trying to transition "gentlemen's agreements" into formal Intergovernmental Agreements with Hualapai and other fire districts and municipalities that were conducting inspections on behalf of the state.

Rowlinson said efforts to evolve a formal agreement with the Hualapai District did not bear fruit. Board member Fred Bunge said he was never aware that the state was interested in a formal inspection agreement with the fire district. He deferred other

questions to the Mohave County Attorney's Office.

Deputy County Attorney Deborah Herbert said she thought a rough draft had been developed but wasn't certain if it was offered for scrutiny or consideration by the Hualapai District Fire Board.

Board President Patricia Lewis has not returned numerous telephone calls seeking comment and clarification on the inspection agreement and the fire hose allegations involving Chief Eder. Chief Eder has been out of state attending a fire training academy and has not returned calls left on his cellphone November 5 and November 6 at his office.

Fire District Board member Jimmie Bodenhamer said he wanted to learn all of the facts before saying anything about the fire hose dispute with the school district.

"I'm not going to be able to make any comment," Bodenhamer said. "You're going to have to talk to Patty (Lewis) if you want a comment."

Herbert said she has been in touch with Lewis recently on fire district business but couldn't answer why she's not responded to media inquiry. Herbert said she believes Lewis wants to open a dialogue with the school district but that nothing can happen until Eder returns to work November 20. Herbert said the Thanksgiving Holiday could make communication or a meeting between the two boards a difficult proposition.

Herbert also confirmed her office has a conflict in that it represents both the fire district and the school district. She said her office would be formalizing through letter previous verbal communication to both districts that they'll need to retain outside counsel should they have need for legal advice in the fire hose dispute.