

Local fire departments get grant for lifesaving equipment

By John Bays

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Earlier this month, the California Office of Traffic Safety awarded a \$38,500 grant to be shared among five local fire departments to buy equipment used to help rescue people trapped in vehicles.

The Mokelumne Rural Fire District, Lodi Fire Department, Liberty Fire District, Woodbridge Fire District and the Lathrop-Manteca Fire District each received \$7,600 to buy equipment used to stabilize vehicles after collisions, Mokelumne Fire Chief Frank Ramirez said on Thursday.

With the grant funds, each fire department was able to purchase a set of three inflatable airbags of various sizes complete with control modules and air pressure regulators, Ramirez said. Each department also purchased a partial set of metal struts, he said, depending on their individual needs

“Without having these grants available, we may not be able to replace equipment like this,” Ramirez said.

When a vehicle rolls over onto its side or roof during a collision, Capt. Mark Weber said the struts — red metal bars — are placed on either side to stabilize the vehicle while firefighters rescue the people trapped inside.

“They’ll stabilize anything up to a bus or big rig — heavy, heavy objects,” he said.

The airbags get even more use than the struts, Weber said, as their flat design allows them to fit into spaces too small for the struts.

“If someone’s trapped under a vehicle, I can shimmy (the airbag) under the vehicle to lift it up and lower it down,” he said.

“I’ve stuck it between a brake pedal and gas pedal to get someone’s foot out,” Ramirez said.

The airbags are hooked up to the same air tanks used in the firefighters’ breathing apparatus, Weber said, and can be placed in different parts of the vehicle depending on how it lands after the collision.

“There’s a shutoff valve on the bag,” he said. “We can shut it off, move and set up another bag and leave the first bag inflated.”

The stabilization equipment was not the first purchase Mokelumne Fire made with grant funds, Weber said. They also recently purchased an electric off-road vehicle with a separate grant from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The vehicle is used for search and rescue missions in areas such as river banks that traditional fire trucks or engines cannot reach.

“We’ve got a lot of remote areas in our district,” Weber said.

With Mokelumne Fire’s operational costs increasing faster than tax revenue, Weber said grants provide much-needed financial assistance.

“We try to utilize tax money as best we can by applying for grants such as these,” he said.