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Loss of inmate crew would leave L.A.-Vegas stretch without aid

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By Christina Almeida

ASSOCIATED PRESS

April 20, 2002

BAKER – It's 111 miles of wide-open desert highway, which makes Interstate 15 from Barstow to Nevada the quickest route to Las Vegas for Southern Californians seeking a weekend getaway – and the most deadly.

In the past three years, 127 people have been killed and 2,003 injured on this stretch of highway used by millions of desert-seekers and Las Vegas-bound travelers.

Until now, travelers have relied on just one local fire and rescue team, staffed by inmates at a minimum-security prison in Baker. They could lose even that under a cost-cutting proposal by Gov. Gray Davis to shut down five of the state's privately run prisons.

Without that rescue team, authorities worry that the highway carnage could become even worse in an isolated area where summer temperatures routinely soar well above 100 degrees.

"Response time, especially on the weekends, could be one to two hours," said Tracey Martinez, a spokeswoman for San Bernardino County. "With the extreme temperatures in the area, it could be a matter of life or death."

For the county, replacing the crew won't come cheap. Fire officials have estimated it will cost them \$900,000 a year to staff a three-person crew out of Baker and \$800,000 to build a new fire station, money Martinez said the county doesn't have and is trying to get from the state and federal government.

Residents of Baker believed the days of people trapped for hours inside or under mangled cars were behind them when the prison rescue team was formed 13 years ago.

The town of about 600, surrounded by scrub brush, dry desert sand and brown mountains, serves largely as a rest stop for people on the way to Las Vegas or nearby Death Valley.



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Among the handful of businesses that line its main drag is one landmark: "The World's Largest Thermometer," which towers 134 feet above the Bun Boy restaurant and can record temperatures as high as 130 degrees.

"It's not so much the community," said resident and town official Le Hayes. "It's everybody that travels on that freeway that will be affected. People who may not be badly hurt could die out there lying on that hot pavement."

Longtime resident Kenneth George remembers the way it used to be before the crew was formed in 1989, the same year Baker Community Correctional Facility opened.

When a semi-truck rolled over on the highway and caught fire, the town's fire truck wouldn't start. By the time the town's volunteer firefighters were able to tow it to the scene, it was too late. "The guy was already burned up. But he was alive there for a long time," said George, 60.

Without the rescue crew, which covers 3,280 square miles, help will be more than 40 miles away. To George, that distance is disturbing. "By the time they get up here, there'll be nothing but ashes left. Then they'll just turn around and go back," he said.

Working the prison crew for less than a year, inmate Eduardo Mariscal, 40, of San Diego, said he's already seen more death than he ever imagined. He's counted 21 bodies.

"After seeing so many deaths, you learn to value life more. Before, I took it for granted," said Mariscal.

Trained in using the Jaws of Life and giving CPR, the inmates say their work has not only taught them about teamwork, but also provided them with an opportunity to repay society.

"It gives me self-satisfaction that we're giving back to the community, that we're doing good," said inmate Paul Klimer, 40, of San Bernardino.

Hoping to save \$5 million, Davis announced plans to shut down not only the prison in Baker, but also Mesa Verde in Bakersfield; Leo Chesney in Live Oak, north of Sacramento; Eagle Mountain in Riverside County; and McFarland Community Correctional Facility in Kern County. They would be closed by June 30 and their 1,400 inmates transferred elsewhere.

Davis, citing a declining prison population, has also recommended the state's four other privately run lockups be closed when their contracts expire in 2007.

Although the Legislature could ignore the request and provide continued funding for the prisons, the governor could eliminate that with his line-item veto.

Critics of the plan have questioned Davis' motives, suggesting political

payback for support from the state Correctional Peace Officers Association may be involved. The union, which doesn't represent private prison employees, spent \$2.3 million helping the governor get elected.

Davis spokesman Byron Tucker denied any quid pro quo, emphasizing that Davis was following a recommendation by the state Department of Corrections.

"He has based this decision on what's best for the state of California," Tucker said. "The bottom line is that the state will realize a significant cost savings due to the closure of these prisons."

Alison Doub, who travels I-15 often with her family, said losing the rescue crew could make her look into other forms of transportation.

"I've seen such horrible accidents on the 15," said Doub, 37, of Sun Valley, Idaho. "I always get nervous making this drive. It's a good excuse to fly to Vegas."

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