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Big Contracts Awarded For New SCBA

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Two major buyers of self contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) have announced their selections for the first new units compliant with the 2007 NFPA standards.

Sperian Fire (formerly Survivair) is in line for a \$20 million order for 4,000 units to be purchased by a consortium of 32 Southern California fire departments. Dräger was selected by Phoenix, Arizona for a first year order of 800 units worth more than \$4 million.

Sperian's Warrior model was chosen from submissions by four competing SCBA manufacturers. It will be the largest municipal contract ever and the financial details are still being worked out.

Dräger Judged The Best

The Phoenix Fire Department heavily weighted its selection on the recommendations of 30 fire-fighters who tested units from all six SCBA manufacturers.

The Phoenix Fire Department drew bids from all six SCBA manufacturers that have had units certified to the National Fire Protection Association's tough new standards that took effect last fall. Dräger was judged the best, followed by Sperian and Mine Safety Appliances.

The Southern California contract is much larger than the one in Phoenix, which calls for more than 800 units during the first year at a cost of \$4.1 million. But Phoenix contract, which extends for five years, has the potential for much more business. It projects additional sales to the Phoenix Fire Department of \$4.7 million over

the life of the contract, and it has a provision that any public safety agency in Arizona can purchase off of it at the same price that Phoenix is paying.

Dräger was a surprise winner. The German company leads all SCBA manufacturers in worldwide sales, but had only carved out a sliver of the

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U.S. market and did not have full NFPA certification when it submitted its bid in Phoenix. It was unable to compete for the Southern California contract because manufacturers were required to have certified units before bids were submitted.

"We were disappointed because Dräger was really working hard on their equipment, but they just didn't get [their certification] in time," said Los Angeles City Assistant Fire Chief Don Frazier, who is in charge of purchasing for his department, which is part of the Southern California consortium.

A 'National Buzz'

In Phoenix, NFPA certification was not required until the time of a contract award. Dräger's PSS 7000 was NFPA certified while Phoenix firefighters were evaluating and testing it.

Assistant Phoenix Fire Chief Kevin Kalkbrenner, who oversees purchasing for his department, said his

SCBA experience had been with the two leading American manufacturers, Scott Health & Safety and MSA.

"I can honestly say Dräger was just not on my radar screen," he said. "They didn't have a lot of name recognition coming in. So I was surprised, I really was, because the more you found out about them, the more you liked them."

Both the Southern California and Phoenix competitions have attracted the attention of fire departments around the country, what Kalkbrenner called a "national buzz."

He said one of his division's deputy chiefs told him in mid-June, "Boss, you would not believe the amount of calls we are getting from all over the country wanting to know what we used for an evaluation process, what was our criteria, a lot of information."

Not A Low-Bid Process

Price accounted for 10 percent of the evaluation scoring in Phoenix, while it was 50 percent for the southern California consortium.

"We wanted to be real careful that it didn't turn into a low bid process," Kalkbrenner said. "There's a lot of things you can cut money on, but not when it comes to this. This is life safety."

The most rigorous part of the Phoenix evaluation – and the one that carried the most points, nearly 40 percent of the total – was called fit and function. It was conducted by 30 of the department's firefighters, who were selected to represent a cross-section of various sizes, ages, genders, races and ranks. Over the course of one week, every

one of the 30 firefighters tested all six SCBA and rated them. Those same firefighters also did the live fire testing during a subsequent week-long evaluation.

The fit and function testing was carried out at the department's regional training facility on a course known as "the grinder," which is normally used to challenge recruits with a wide range of tests at 15 stations, according to Kalkbrenner.

15 Testing Stations

"They put them through these 15 different stations that simulate work on the fire ground, everything from taking the plug to advancing hose lines to rescue to forceable entry while they were wearing [SCBA]," he said. "Dräger placed first or second in every single testing category every single time."

He said he expects Dräger will get more orders from other Arizona fire departments because of the provision that they can purchase off the Phoenix contract at the same price.

"When they decide they've got to go out for their new SCBA contracts, they'll definitely take a look at Dräger," he said. "We do a regional training academy. Once some of these other officers who come in and help out get a chance to wear these rigs, I think Dräger is going to have the ability to start selling itself."

Accelerating Technology

The five-year Dräger contract, approved by the Phoenix City Council June 18, is shorter than the fire department's last two SCBA contracts, according to Kalkbrenner. He said the most recent one with Scott extended for 10 years and before that, MSA had it for 10 years.

"We shortened the length of this contract simply because what we've found is that technology has been accelerating year after year," he said. "Rather than go 10, we went five on this because we don't know what technology is going to present in five years."

Both Dräger and Sperian Fire, formerly known as Survivair, undertook complete makeovers of their units to meet the revised 2007 NFPA standards for SCBA and personal alert safety system (PASS) devices that took effect in September. And neither company achieved NFPA certification until this spring.

One piece of technology that was included as an option in the Sperian bid is an SCBA emergency escape filter made by Essex PB&R of St. Louis, Mo. A National Fire Protection Association task group is working to develop a standard for escape filters, but the standard is not expected for several more years.

Essex, which calls its product the Last Chance Filter, has been seeking third-party endorsement from the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Filter Option

Frazeur, the Los Angeles City assistant chief, said the Essex option in the Sperian bid was an important factor for his department, which intends to order the filters.

"We have been waiting to see what

kind of approval Essex was going to get, and they haven't gotten any formal approval," he said, "but we're going to move on anyway."

Frazeur said he does not know whether other consortium fire departments plan to take advantage of the emergency escape filter option.

A Huge Boost

Details of the Southern California evaluation and contract were not public as of mid-June. Although the consortium had declared its intent to award the contract to Sperian, the two sides had not begun negotiations on the specific numbers and options that would be involved.

But one thing was sure. Winning the contract is a huge boost for Sperian, which has its respiratory subsidiary based in Santa Ana, Calif. Of the 32 fire departments in the consortium, seven have been using Survivair SCBA, including the two largest departments, Los Angeles City and Los Angeles County.

Sperian Senior SCBA Product Manager Steve Weinstein estimated the value of the contract at \$22 to \$24 million.

"Obviously the dollars are important," he said. "But beyond that we retain our two largest customers, which is extremely important because they are in our backyard, and we gain 25 new customers."

Immediate Credibility

Even more important, he said, is the quality of the endorsement Sperian's Warrior SCBA received.

"For a large consortium of fire departments to come to a consensus agreement is a major statement and immediately gives us credibility for this SCBA and validates everything we've been saying all along," he said.

As is the case in Phoenix, Weinstein said he knows fire departments from around the country have been watching for the outcome of the Southern California contract.

"And now they've seen what happened," he said. "So it should be very good news for us in a lot of places."

The Phoenix SCBA Evaluation

Out of a possible total of 1,000 points, the three highest rated SCBA were: Dräger PSS 7000, 821 points; Sperian Warrior, 710.5 points; and MSA FireHawk M7, 645.4 points.

Points were awarded in seven categories. All proposals were evaluated on the basis of:

- Price, 100 points.
- Written proposal content, 200 points.
- Ease of maintenance, 50 points.
- Fit and function, 375 points.

The three highest scorers were then evaluated for:

- Live fire testing, 150 points.
- Options available, 100 points.
- Communications, 25 points.