



Captain Mike Dugan hangs the American flag at the World Trade Center after the 9/11 attacks.

FARS:

Why Have I Never Heard Of This?

By Michael M. Dugan

FARS, the short version of "firefighter air replenishment systems," are an in-building air system similar to a standpipe that firefighters use to replenish their air. When firefighters see this system and find out they can get immediate air, where they need it, in large structures they want it. It's a no-brainer for safe, effective operations in very challenging structures. This leads to some obvious questions:

1. Why is FARS not mandated in every high-rise building?
2. Why have so many firefighters never heard of FARS?
3. Why are Fire Chiefs and Fire Marshals not using their authority to adopt 2015 International Fire Code FARS Appendix L, the Uniform Plumbing Code FBARS Appendix F or soon to be NFPA 1 FBARS Annex in the fire code and get these systems into their new high rise buildings?

In the fire service, we are often reactionary. We make changes only after fatal fires or multiple fires with the same underlying issues. This is especially true with our air and air management. We can go back to disdain that existed when SCBAs were introduced to the fire service and the resistance to using them and adopting effective air management. The fire service is very slow to change.

Back in the day, people who used SCBA were looked upon as cowards or wimps. If we didn't use those things we were tough guys. Most of the people who thought that way are long gone, and a lot of them suffered at the end of their lives from the choices they made. Many today are dealing with the horrible effectiveness of breathing smoke in the age of plastics. We all know some names and it is heartbreaking to witness.

More changes came. We moved up to getting off the back step. Those of us who rode the back step loved it and remember it fondly, but we don't like to remember our brothers and sisters falling off the back step, getting into accidents when members were thrown off the rig. Then women began trying to join the fire service. "They will never be able to cut it." "They do not have the strength or ability." Wrong again! Along came bunker gear, and we said we weren't going to wear it. We will become overheated, it will limit our movement, and we won't feel any heat until it's too late. And finally, there's the use of seat belts. We fought that for years. Why?

Now we come to systems such as FARS and we wonder why we have never heard of it. There are buildings throughout the world that are going up that are known as mega-high-rises. These buildings can be eighty to ninety stories high. These buildings are mixed-use with commercial occupancies on a number of the lower floors and residential above. We can be putting occupants 80 stories or more above the street. What is the fire service's plan to rescue these people? If we had a fire on the 40th floor, we might have up to 50 floors to search above the fire including stairwells and hallways. How much manpower, and more importantly air, will that require?

We in the fire service are allowing building to be built without the structure and support required to fight a fire in one of the mega-buildings. We, the fire service, have to become more involved in the construction of and the safety systems needed in these mega-high-rises. FARS will be fought by the building construction industry because they don't want to spend the money required to install such systems. What is the life of one resident or one firefighter worth? Why don't we require the inclusion of firefighter air replenishment systems to fight fire and search above the fire in our building and construction codes? We require standpipes for water, elevators to operate in Fireman service and sprinklers in our codes, but not air. Water in the standpipes and sprinkler systems helps to control and eventually extinguish the fire. The elevators, if they work, make it easier to get to the fire. The air required for firefighters to fight the fire in an IDLH environment comes as a secondary thought. We can have all the water we need and the people we need to fight the fire, but if we don't have the air for them that fire will not go out.

The fire service is changing as the world around us changes. The buildings we fight fires in have changed and therefore our tactics have changed. We need to also change the support that the building gives to us in a firefight. We have new rules coming in on elevator use; we have new tactics on wind-impacted fires and when we ventilate. But we still need extra people to manually transport SCBA cylinders to the staging area at a high-rise fire. This tactic is usually done by additional companies or second alarm units and it is nothing but playing catch-up. How much easier and quicker would it be if the air were there all the time?

FARS are there to support firefighters and fire attack. Making air available in the building for firefighters' use, especially in an emergency, is an appealing scenario. You may not have heard of FARS but it is highly recommended that you seek them out and get information for your municipality. If they are building high-rise buildings or large area buildings where providing air replenishment can be a problem, installing a system to assist firefighters in filling up their SCBA whenever needed is a practical solution. Not all buildings require this. Perhaps not all jurisdictions are going to have buildings that need it. But if you do and your jurisdiction is building mid- and high-rise buildings, investigate this system. In a lot of smaller departments the manpower responding to the fire becomes an issue. If we can free people up from cylinder duty and use them for the firefight or relief purposes it makes our job easier.

These systems should be required in every new mid- and high-rise. Your duty is to check out the system and see if it will work in your jurisdiction. FARS have been around for more than a decade, and are currently installed in more than 500 buildings across 10 states and 85 jurisdictions from California to Florida. Why have you never heard of them? Because the fire service has a history of being slow to change, and builders resist new safety codes. Building is not slowing down. We need to keep up. Our lives depend on it.

Michael M. Dugan is a 38-year veteran of the fire service and a 26-year veteran of the New York City Fire Department (FDNY). As a firefighter in Ladder Company 43, Dugan received the James Gordon Bennett medal in 1992 and the Harry M. Archer Medal in 1993, the FDNY's highest award for bravery. He was an instructor at the inception of the FDNY's Annual Education Day and has developed programs currently taught to all FDNY members during the annual event. Dugan is a member of the IAFC Safety, Health & Survival Section. He serves as a HOT instructor at Firehouse Expo and FDIC, and is a regular contributor to fire service magazines. He also lectures at various events around the country on topics dealing with truck company operations, building construction, scene size-up and today's fire service.