

# **FIRE AND WATER DON'T MIX**

## **Report on the Westport County Water District - Volunteer Fire Department**

March 1, 2007

### ***Summary***

The 2006/2007 Mendocino County Grand Jury conducted an oversight of the Westport County Water District (WCWD) which provides water, sewage, and volunteer fire protection services for the district. The primary focus of this oversight is the Volunteer Fire Department.

The WCWD is a small district within the unincorporated village of Westport, providing water and sewer services for approximately 45 parcels, covering slightly less than 10 square miles. In addition to the water and sewer services, it is tasked to provide fire protection for the town. The water and sewer revenue can only be used to support those specific services and cannot be used to offset Fire Department operations.

The Fire Department is supported solely by the small amount of county parcel tax along with a high level of enthusiastic community support and fund raising, to ensure annual operations. The Fire Department provides fire protection for Westport as well as responding to all calls within their approximately 100 square mile response area.

A larger and separate Fire Protection District encompassing the total response area ("sphere of influence") for the current Westport Fire Department has the potential to produce a significantly larger parcel tax base. These funds are critical to support the required insurance, equipment, and training.

### ***Background***

The Grand Jury is continuing the oversight of rural fire protection districts within Mendocino County, and in particular the operation of the Westport Volunteer Fire Department (WVFD) in light of recent concerns within that community. Due to serious criminal events and subsequent negative publicity, the community united to correct leadership issues. Other significant positive changes were made to ensure continued provision of fire protection within the district and beyond.

The WCWD is an enterprise district meaning they can bill for services provided.

### ***Methods***

The Grand Jury conducted site visits and interviewed Fire Department and Water District personnel. The Grand Jury also reviewed relevant documents such as budget, personnel rosters, and equipment lists.

## **Findings**

1. The primary function of the WCWD is to provide water and sewer services.
2. Fire protection service, provided by the WVFD, is an additional service defined when the WCWD was created.
3. The WCWD budget is based primarily on revenue received from water and sewer services.
4. Revenue from water and sewer services (66 residents/businesses) cannot be used in support of fire protection.
5. The County of Mendocino has funded WCWD with \$2,500 to \$6,000 per year over the last three years.
6. County parcel tax monies, received by the district, are used primarily to offset State mandated workers' compensation insurance premiums for volunteer fire protection personnel.
7. Current workers' compensation premiums are nearing \$6,000 a year.
8. WVFD enjoys a high level of community support. Fund raising and private donations supplement costs for annual operations.
9. The WVFD has a roster of 15 volunteers. The 11 active members consist of: the chief, assistant chief, three captains, and six firefighters.
10. The WVFD has six certified first responders and three certified EMTs, with two more in training.
11. Currently WVFD personnel pay for most of their essential training.
12. The Coast Guard and CDF have provided training and surplus equipment for the volunteers at no cost to the WVFD.
13. When WVFD personnel are out of the area for training, the town is often left with few qualified volunteers to cover emergency situations.
14. WVFD is actively pursuing grants from various public and private sources to supplement operational needs.
15. Recruitment for additional personnel is limited by the cost of increased insurance premiums.
16. WVFD has five operational vehicles in their fleet.
17. Due to financial constraints, WVFD currently does not have an operating reserve and has no plans for additional equipment or replacements.
18. The WCWD tax base includes approximately 45 separate parcels within the unincorporated village of Westport, which covers slightly less than 10 square miles.
19. The WVFD response area is approximately 100 square miles. The boundaries range from seven miles east along Branscomb Road, north on Highway 1 to Usal Road, and south to the Ten Mile Bridge. It also includes the contiguous peripheral coastal and inland areas.
20. Within a given year, the WVFD responds to three to four calls within the district (village of Westport), and another 50-plus calls outside the district.
21. Services provided outside of the district boundaries or to nonresidents are not billed.
22. Costs for establishing a new district, including necessary elections, filing fees, and required documentation, can be in excess of \$10,000 to \$15,000.

## ***Recommendations***

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. WVFD reduce their roster to include only active members. This would allow for new personnel recruitment within current insurance premium budget.
2. a separate and distinct Fire Protection District be established to encompass the entire response area (“sphere of influence”) of the WVFD, and the fire protection services currently provided by the WCWD be transferred to the new district.
3. the Mendocino County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) provide technical and financial support and assistance in the formation of a new fire district in the Westport area.
4. the Board of Supervisors support and assist the development of a new Fire Protection District for the Westport area in principle, and financially by waiving certain associated fees.

## ***Comments***

The WCWD and community of Westport are to be commended for their ongoing support of the WVFD. A small number of dedicated and capable volunteers continually provide vital fire protection, medical, and recovery services for the coast, north of Fort Bragg.

This well-functioning volunteer fire department emerged from serious recent difficulties. It serves the community of Westport and handles any and all emergencies, within their response area. The size and nature of the WCWD is currently limited by property tax revenue. If the Fire Protection District expanded, it would receive larger parcel tax revenues to support critical training and service operations.

## ***Response Required***

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Finding 1, 2, 5, 6, 11, 13, 17, 18, 21, 22;  
Recommendation 2, 4)

Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer (Finding 1, 2, 5, 6, 11, 13, 17, 18, 21, 22;  
Recommendation 2, 4)

Board of Directors, Mendocino County LAFCO (Finding 1-5, 11, 13, 14, 17-22;  
Recommendation 2,3)

Board of Directors, Westport County Water District (All Findings; Recommendation 1, 2)  
Chief, Westport Volunteer Fire Department (All Findings; Recommendations 1,2)