



SEVEN FIRE DISTRICTS OF RURAL MENDOCINO COUNTY (June 28, 2005)

SUMMARY

In the course of performing an oversight on a Mendocino County agency, the Grand Jury was alerted to a growing crisis facing rural fire districts throughout much of California. This news prompted the Grand Jury to undertake a limited but in-depth investigation of a sampling of County fire districts. The seven fire districts include Albion/Little River, Covelo, Hopland, Long Valley (Laytonville), Piercy, Potter Valley, Redwood Valley-Calpella.

BACKGROUND

There are twenty-one rural fire districts in Mendocino County. The seven districts chosen for oversight in this report constitute, in the Grand Jury's judgment, a representative cross-section of rural firefighting agencies. They include the well funded and the poorly funded, the inland and the coastal, well-trained personnel and those who struggle for time and funds for adequate training. They vary in size both in roster numbers and in geographic areas. These rural fire districts in all their differences and commonalities are crucial safeguards to lives and property throughout Mendocino County.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury visited the sites of each of the seven districts, interviewed fire chiefs and, when available, other officers and fire personnel, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTS), and district board members. The Grand Jury examined budgets, operational records, organizational charts and State of California Regulatory documents affecting rural fire districts. In addition, the Grand Jury interviewed officials of the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), the Mendocino County Office of Risk Management and the Ukiah Valley Fire District.

COMMON FINDINGS

1. The two basic functions of a fire department are quick fire suppression and fire prevention.
2. The National Fire Protection Association has established universally recognized standard as guides for proper fire protection.
3. The State of California governs the functions of LAFCO and Special Districts including the rural fire districts.
4. The amount of State tax revenue returned to the rural fire districts has not increased although the cost of operating these districts has continued to increase.
5. Government Code Section 56381 and the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act regulate the LAFCO funding formula; LAFCO receives 1/3 of its income from



- the cities in the County, 1/3 from the County governments and 1/3 from the Special Districts, including rural fire districts.
6. Some rural fire districts indicate that the services they receive from LAFCO fall far short of the value of the funds they lose to support this agency.
 7. Many rural fire districts incur more annual expenses than revenue.
 8. Workman's Compensation absorbs a major part of the budget in many of the surveyed districts.
 9. Most rural fire districts must supplement their budgets with fundraising events.
 10. Those districts which operate their own ambulance service derive a portion of their income from this service.
 11. Most surveyed fire districts are 100% volunteer.
 12. Some rural fire districts do not offer adequate training.
 13. Some rural fire districts offer training both on-site and out of district.
 14. No rural fire district has 24/7 station staffing although volunteers are on-call 24/7.
 15. Most fire district volunteers carry their turnout gear in their vehicles.
 16. Most fire district volunteers carry radio receivers.
 17. Most rural fire districts have defibrillators and the Jaws of Life readily available.
 18. Many rural fire districts must rely on aging vehicles requiring frequent and expensive maintenance.
 19. Some rural fire districts have difficulty recruiting volunteers.
 20. The majority of calls in the surveyed fire districts are for medical emergencies.
 21. A high percentage of the medical emergencies cited in Finding 18 are the result of traffic accidents.
 22. Insurance Service Organization (ISO) ratings for rural fire districts are scaled from 1 to 10; the higher the number, the higher the insurance premium for structure owners.
 23. Most of the surveyed districts are rated at 7 or 8 by the ISO.
 24. ISO ratings for rural districts are based, in part, on the number of hydrants available within the district; without hydrants, a district is rated no lower than 8.
 25. The California Division of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) assists most of the fire districts countywide, providing technical support and paid personnel; all surveyed rural fire districts depend upon this support and reciprocate. The districts are most often first on the scene to suppress a wildlands fire.
 26. Most CDF stations are closed on a seasonal basis.
 27. The surveyed districts all have mutual aid agreements with CDF and adjacent districts.



28. CDF provides, if requested, arson investigation services for any county fire district.
29. There are numerous structures, including residences, which do not have adequate fire protection because of their isolation and/or inaccessibility.
30. The Mendocino County Fire Chief's Association (FCA) meets on a regular basis with representatives of other County and State agencies, public utilities and private organizations to discuss mutual needs and concerns and to attempt resolution of problems.
31. Mendocino County does not have a program of fire prevention, as opposed to fire suppression. The Mendocino Board of Supervisors has the authority to adopt a more stringent fire safety code that would incorporate a fire prevention program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors reevaluate the financial support given to rural fire districts in order to prevent impending rural fire department financial ruin and collapse. (Findings 4,5,6,7).
2. The Grand Jury recommends that the FCA encourage and assist rural fire districts in facilitating staff and volunteer training through cooperation and, where feasible, collaboration. (Findings 10,11,28)
3. The Grand Jury recommends that the FCA, in conjunction with **local** fire districts, raise public awareness of the need to replace aging equipment that is expensive to maintain and becoming obsolete. (Findings 16,28)
4. The Grand Jury recommends that the FCA continue to inform the public of the accomplishments of rural fire districts as well as the increasing difficulties in some districts in recruiting and training staff and volunteers. (Findings 9,10,11,28)
5. The Grand Jury recommends that, to the extent possible, rural fire districts provide incentive pay and/or other benefits to assist in recruiting and training volunteers. (Findings 5,10,11)
6. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors create, as soon as possible, a centralized authority for overseeing the operations and funding of the rural fire districts. (Finding 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)



ALBION/LITTLE RIVER FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT
ALBION/LITTLE RIVER VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

Specific Findings

1. Albion/Little River Fire District (A/LRFD) protects an area of 40 square miles and a population of approximately 3500.
2. Water supplies for the A/LRFD are provided by the Albion Water District; the Department maintains several large water storage tanks within their area and has access to hydrants at The Woods, a senior living facility, and two wells adjacent to fire stations.
3. A/LRFD, through a ballot measure passed in 2000, became a taxing authority; these local funds form a substantial portion of their annual \$80,000 budget.
4. The annual A/LRFD emergency response breakdown is approximately 60% medical, 25% traffic accidents, 15% fires/cliff or ocean rescues.
5. A/LRFD is 100% volunteer; members average 7 to 8 years of service, significantly higher than the state wide average of 2 to 3 years. All volunteers are firefighters, eight are EMTS.
6. A/LRFD has an annual training budget; the twenty volunteers can be sent out of district for training sessions and trainers are recruited to hold sessions on site.
7. In addition to light and heavy trucks, engines and water tenders, A/LRFD equipment includes an oceangoing Zodiac rescue boat.



COVELO FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT
COVELO VOLUNTEER FIRE AND AMBULANCE SERVICE

Specific Findings

1. The Covelo Fire Protection District (CFPD) protects an area of 50 square miles and a population of approximately 3000.
2. Water supplies for the CFPD are provided by one hydrant; water is supplied by one well. Electricity is backed up by a generator.
3. The CFPD has sufficient equipment to accomplish its mission, but much of the equipment is old and in need of replacement. For example, the 1970 International Type III engine is outdated.
4. The CFPD has 23 members, two salaried and 21 volunteers, including two cadets. At present, the District also has three volunteers in training.
5. The CFPD annual revenues from taxes are \$34,000; this amount is supplemented by donations, fundraisers, and interest from an endowment. Calls answered to Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) lands are usually reimbursed if it is a wildlands fire.
6. The CFPD has two ambulances, a 1991 Type II and a 1997 Type III, staffed by the volunteers indicated in Finding 4. This staffing includes nine EMTs and two first responders.
7. The geographic isolation of Covelo creates problems in training EMTs and volunteer firepersons. The problem is compounded by volunteer inability to devote time to travel and training while committed to fulltime employment.



**HOPLAND VOLUNTEER FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT
HOPLAND VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT**

Specific Findings

1. The Hopland Volunteer Fire Department (HVFD) protects an area of 350 square miles and a population of approximately 1,400.
2. Water supplies for the HVFD are provided by the municipal district to 72 hydrants and to Department storage tanks.
3. HVFD has the equipment necessary to accomplish its mission, but much of the equipment is old and in need of replacement. The Department has only one 22 year old water tender and it is in need of major repairs.
4. Although HVFD is authorized to carry 30 volunteer firefighter positions, only 17 of these positions are currently filled. From December to April, the Department carries four salaried positions, three fulltime and one part-time.
5. HVFD members, trained by in-house and off-site instructors, must sometimes pay for their own training.
6. Because the District has an arrangement with the CDF and has been working and training in CDF space for several years, the HVFD must comply with CDF standards.



LONG VALLEY FIRE DISTRICT
LAYTONVILLE FIRE DEPARTMENT

Specific Findings

1. The Laytonville Fire Department (LFD) protects an area of 250 square miles and a population of approximately 3500.
2. Water supplies for the LFD are provided by a hydrant system which extends for two to three miles from the firehouse; water is supplied by the Laytonville Water District.
3. The LFD owns the most up-to-date equipment of the seven surveyed districts. For example, the Department's oldest engine was built in 1989.
4. The LFD has 32 members, two salaried and 30 volunteers, including a chaplain. The department has two ambulances; the volunteers include four paramedics.
5. The LVFD is supported by a \$120,000 tax base.
6. The LFD offers an EMT class onsite annually to which other County districts send their volunteers. The District also offers a community classroom at the station in which interested high school students spend a class period learning the tasks and responsibilities of fire service.



County of Mendocino
Grand Jury

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POTTER VALLEY COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT
POTTER VALLEY VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

Specific Findings

1. The Potter Valley Volunteer Fire Department (PVVFD) protects an area of 275 square miles and a population of approximately 2000.
2. Water supplies for the PVVFD are provided by a hydrant with generator backup located at the firehouse and supplied by a well.
3. A water tender holding 5000 gallons is a PVVFD standby water source.
4. PVVFD has the equipment necessary to accomplish its mission, but much of the equipment is old and in need of replacement.
5. The PVVFD is a 100% volunteer district; the 21 members include a chief, two assistant chiefs, four active EMTS and one paramedic, and four volunteers who are also CDF employees. Two Junior firemen (cadets) also serve the district.
6. PVVFD volunteer training includes Swift Water Rescue training for Russian and Eel River incidents.



REDWOOD VALLEY-CALPELLA FIRE DISTRICT

Specific Findings

1. The Redwood Valley-Calpella Fire District (RVCFD) protects an area of 60 square miles and a population of approximately 7800.
2. Water supplies for the RVCFD are provided by 110 hydrants in Redwood Valley and 38 in Calpella; water is supplied by three water districts and various private water sources. These sources are primarily on the Valley floor; few are in the rural or foothill areas.
3. RVCFD has sufficient equipment to accomplish its mission, but much of the equipment is old and in need of replacement. For example, the mutual aid wildland 1979 Ford Type 3 pumper is no longer reliable enough to be taken on out-of-County Strike Teams.
4. The RVCFD has 26 members; of these, three are salaried, 16 are volunteers, and seven are cadets.
5. The RVCFD's recently purchased water tender was funded by the volunteers, private donations, and a grant through the Sho-Ka-Wah casino in Hopland.
6. The RVCFD has converted a retired ambulance into a mobile compressed air support to refill firefighters' portable air tanks at the scene of an incident.



PIERCY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT
PIERCY VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

Specific Findings

NOTE: The Piercy Fire Protection District, supporting a 100% volunteer Fire Department, was formed in 1956 when three lumber mills were flourishing in the area. On January 1, 2004, the Department was no longer a viable entity: OSHA specifications could not be met, the Chief retired and two of the remaining volunteers resigned. Residents of this bedroom community in northern Mendocino County, while they do not seem willing to pay additional taxes, continue to be hopeful that their District can support an active Fire Department in the near future.

1. The Piercy Volunteer Fire Department (PVFD) protected an area of 98 square miles and a population of approximately 290.
2. Water supplies for the PVFD were provided primarily by the South Fork of the Eel River and landowner's private reservoirs when available. PVFD also had access to the hydrants in Richardson's Grove. Two of three storage tanks in the district are presently unusable.
3. The PVFD owns a 1972 Chevrolet Type I 1200 gallon pumper and a 1978 Dodge one ton 4x4 wildlands truck. Two International engines obtained through the Federal Excess Program had to be returned following the collapse of the Department. The Department also has eight sets of turnout gear that do not meet OSHA requirements.
4. The PVFD has, at present, no members. After recent recruiting efforts by the Interim Chief and the two remaining Fire Commissioners, fifteen residents expressed an interest in joining a reconstituted PVFD.
5. There is, at present, \$15,000 in the District Funds account in the State Controller's office in reserve for the Piercy Fire Protection District. Piercy receives \$8000 annually from the County from which various fees and expenses are deducted.



COMMENTS

In a State as huge and geographically diverse as California, fire protection services range from well-trained, well-paid urban districts using state of the art equipment to rural, 90% to 100% volunteer districts struggling for time and funds to train members and searching for ways to replace aging, outmoded equipment. Much of Mendocino County is served by the latter, many caught in an economic "perfect storm" as they attempt to protect their communities.

Even as retirees flock to the County and developers rush to meet the demands of the second home market, the cost of firefighting equipment increases, potential volunteers see jobs decline and home prices soar, and the State imposes additional training hours and mandated services on rural fire districts.

The portion of property taxes allotted to rural fire districts has not increased since 1956, although the cost of district operations continues to rise. While some fortunate districts receive endowments and gifts from members of the community, others write and rewrite grant requests, raffle patchwork quilts, and pray that the annual district barbecue will attract paying customers from beyond their boundaries into the outlying areas. It is estimated that a rural fire district in our County of between 20-25 volunteers and an annual budget of between \$75,000-\$85,000 is equal to the cost of **one** fully equipped journeyman firefighter employed by the San Francisco Fire Department.

The volunteer, who may well hold a full time job and cherish time with his/her family, must also manage on-call and training hours and State mandated services to public buildings in addition to dwellings, small businesses and wildlands. Volunteer EMTS may be called to the scene of a midnight heart attack or a vehicle accident on State 101, State 1 or any of the myriad of winding, deteriorating County roads.

Mendocino County residents would surely agree with the thought that one of the finest ways to serve your community is to join their volunteer fire department. Thousands of us depend on rural fire districts for our safety, our health and the integrity of our communities. The Grand Jury recommends that both State and County governments serve these districts as fairly and faithfully as these districts serve their residents.

Response Required

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors



County of Mendocino
Grand Jury

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Response Requested

Chairman, Local Agency Formation Commission
President, Mendocino County Fire Chief's Association
Mendocino County Safety Officer
Director, Mendocino County Department of Building and Planning
Mendocino County Unit Manager, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
Chief, Little River Fire Department
Chief, Covelo Volunteer Fire and Ambulance Service
Chief, Hopland Fire Department
Chief, Long Valley Fire District
Chief, Potter Valley Volunteer Fire Department
Chief, Redwood Valley-Calpella Fire District
Interim Chief, Piercy Fire Department