



SOLANO COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

2020-2021

**Wildfires On The Horizon
Solano Homes At Risk!**

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I. SUMMARY

As the fire season returns and its severity increases in the Bay Area, the 2020-2021 Solano County Civil Grand Jury has found that the county Fire Protection Districts (FPDs) may be less prepared to fight the fires than may be necessary to provide protection for residents. Almost every smaller FPD faces bankruptcy and depends on volunteer firefighters to contend with issues within their areas.

The 2020-2021 Solano County Civil Grand Jury investigated the actions implemented to address these issues. The FPDs in Solano County try to protect county residents from wildfires, some with ancient equipment, volunteer firefighters and paltry funding. With another drought year upon us, the county needs to find some workable plans and sources of funds immediately.

Fire season is here. Procrastination is not an option.

II. INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of August 17, 2020, at approximately 6:30 a.m., a spot fire was reported near Lake Hennessey in Napa County. By 11:30 p.m. the next night, August 18, 2020, several fires had merged, burning over 31,000 acres, threatening Vacaville and Fairfield in Solano County. Mandatory evacuations were ordered for north Fairfield and northwest Vacaville as the fire raced down Mix Canyon Road to Pleasants Valley Road. Travis Air Force Base ordered immediate evacuations for non-mission essential personnel and mission essential personnel were advised to contact their chain of command for duty status.

The LNU Complex Fire, which affected Solano, Napa, Sonoma, Yolo, and Lake Counties, destroyed thousands of acres and 1,491 structures. People died. Livestock, wildlife, and pets perished. The fire burned 65.625 square miles (42,000 acres) in Solano County. According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the fire destroyed 309 single-family residences and 392 “minor structures” in Solano County.

All municipal fire departments in Solano County responded to the LNU Complex Fire and had personnel and engines that continued to provide coverage within their respective borders. The Cordelia, Montezuma, Suisun, and Vacaville FPDs, which operate with volunteer firefighters, found it challenging to provide engine companies and staffing to service the areas vacated by the fire engines assigned to the fire.

So far this year, rainfall in Solano County has amounted to a little over 7 inches, less than 30%

of normal. Solano County is in another dry year, creating a potential tinderbox this summer. Governor Gavin Newsom said on March 30, 2021 “In California, climate change is making the hots hotter and the dries drier, leaving us with world record-breaking temperatures and devastating wildfires threatening our communities.” Volunteer fire personnel protect the rural areas, some using outmoded equipment, with insufficient training, and especially – a lack of funds.

III. METHODOLOGY

Attended:

Solano Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) meetings
Workshop – ‘Fire Safety’s Sustainable Future-Solano County LAFCO Fire District Workshop’ - August 10, 2020

Reviewed:

Citygate Associates LLC (2021) ‘Fire Districts Deployment and Fiscal/Governance Options Analysis’ December 14, 2020 – <https://www.citygateassociates.com/>
and at: <https://www.solanolafco.com/Agendas/2020/121420> Item 8. A.

Newspaper reports regarding fire in Solano County.

Hansen, Todd R. (2021) ‘Supes consider how to spend \$87M in federal rescue funds’ *Fairfield Daily Republic* May 26, 2021.

Hansen, Todd R. (2021) ‘LNU Fire recovery plan updated for Solano supervisors’ *Fairfield Daily Republic* April 14, 2021.

Hansen, Todd R. (2021) ‘Solano supervisors to address long term LNU fire recovery’ *Fairfield Daily Republic* April 12, 2021.

Hansen, Todd R. (2021) ‘Fairfield looks to use FEMA grant to add 5 firefighters’ *Fairfield Daily Republic* March 5, 2021.

Maginnis-Honey, Amy (2021) ‘Suisun Fire Division Chief wraps up 27-year stint with department’ *Fairfield Daily Republic* March 3, 2021.

Hansen, Todd R. (2021) ‘Cleanup after LNU fire will continue into next year’ *Fairfield Daily Republic* January 1, 2021.

Staff Reports - Stockton Record (2020) ‘“Extreme behavior”: Residents flee California fire as blaze storms into Vacaville’ – *Recordnet.com* August 19, 2020

Mittleman, Dawn (2006) ‘Solano Fire District MSRs [*Municipal Service Reviews*] Unveil Challenges Rural Districts Face with Urban Service Level Demands’ P.4 *The*

Sphere - CALAFCO Journal, The Sphere is a quarterly publication of the California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions. September 2006.

Articles and notices.

Lester, David (2007) 'The Graying Workforce -- Are You Prepared?' *Industry Week* - Sep 10, 2007 - <https://www.industryweek.com/the-economy/article/21935182>

FEMA – 'Assistance to Firefighters Grants Program' - Fire safety grants fund critically needed resources to equip and train emergency personnel, enhance efficiencies and support community resilience. - <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/firefighters>

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Fiscal Year 2020 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program - https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fy_2020_hsgp_nof.pdf

Chase - Firefighter Insider – 'How Many Firefighters Are Needed to Fight a Fire?' <https://firefighterinsider.com/how-many-firefighters-are-needed-to-fight-a-fire/>

News/Media

CNN News 'California Wildfires Have Burned An Area Almost The Size Of Connecticut' September 14, 2020 - <https://sacramento.cbslocal.com/2020/09/14/california-wildfires-size-of-connecticut/>

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) 1910.134(g)(4) – Respiratory Protection - <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1910/1910.134>

Office of Governor Gavin Newsom (Mar 30, 2021) 'Ahead of Peak Fire Season, Governor Newsom Announces Surge in Firefighting Support' - <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2021/03/30/ahead-of-peak-fire-season-governor-newsom-announces-surge-in-firefighting-support-3-30-21/>

CBS Sacramento News circa August, 2020

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Fiscal Year 2020 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program

OSHA 1910.134(g)(4) – Respiratory Protection

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

The Solano Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) has studied fire protection in the county for several years. On August 12, 2019, LAFCO contracted with Citygate Associates, LLC (Citygate), one of the most experienced fire deployment consultancies in the western United States. Citygate's mandate was to "conduct a standards of coverage, fiscal/governance options, and deployment analysis for the Cordelia, Montezuma, Suisun, and Vacaville FPDs". It finished its study and submitted its recommendations to a countywide gathering of fire chiefs and fire district board members at the end of 2020. On December 14, 2020, LAFCO received Citygate's final report and directed its staff to continue Ad-Hoc Committee Fire District Task Force workshops. One of the most telling recommendations of the report is that local FPDs need to consolidate and share their resources. That recommendation dovetails with one of the recommendations that the Solano County Civil Grand Jury is making.

All four FPDs studied in Solano County need additional funding to effectively perform their services. In particular, the Cordelia FPD Fire Chief has historically been a paid position, however, the current chief at his request reverted the position to volunteer to balance the budget. Beyond that, firefighters in the district are dealing with an inadequate facility and a fire truck that is 26 years old. This, in an area that has been threatened with major infernos for the past few years. The story for the Cordelia FPD threatens to be a blueprint for other small fire districts in the area, which are only slightly better off financially.

The Citygate report has been accepted by LAFCO. Here are Citygate's findings:

1. All four districts don't have the minimum number of personnel to provide response services from a staffed fire station 24 hours per day, seven days per week, and adequate command and quality control for training, safety, and fiscal responsibilities.
2. The Districts and nearby cities are not using the closest available unit response to emergencies. To not do so inappropriately delays response times.
3. As separate entities, the Districts are very exposed to single points of failure if they were to lose a few career personnel or highly responsive volunteers. They lack "strength in numbers" to be resilient and have redundancy.
4. Given the current wildfire and building fire environment, Districts must fix their fragile personnel counts and 24-hour-per-day, seven day-per-week, in-station staffing. Incidents cannot wait for a minimal force to respond from home or business.
5. Montezuma, Suisun, and Vacaville FPDs are fiscally viable at the moment but cannot likely afford more in-station staffing.

6. The fiscal crisis in Cordelia FPD and the limited staffing funds in all the Districts presents an opportunity for all four districts to thoughtfully consider merging to create a platform for sustainable fire services over the long term.
7. The most viable governance alternative for successful implementation is a merged or consolidated FPD, with the goal of a future Countywide FPD.
8. Any alternative service delivery or governance model should include supplemental taxing authority to ensure adequate long-term funding.

On April 13, 2021 Solano County's Board of Supervisors (BOS) adopted the Solano County LNU Lightning Complex Recovery Strategic Plan (The Plan) to guide county agencies through the multi-year recovery and reimbursement process. The manager of the Office of Emergency Services of Solano County, reported to the BOS and is quoted in The Fairfield Daily Republic as follows: "One of the most terrifying characteristics of the LNU Lightning Complex Fire was the speed with which it blazed through the Vacaville hills."

The Plan addresses the long-term wildfire problems in the county. However, it does not begin to address the FPDs' issues this summer. The Fire Districts are the county's first line of defense as wildfires spring up or come from other areas. Now is the time, as the fire season begins in earnest, for the county to address the shortcomings of the FPDs with grant writing and other support resources and immediate funding to fill the rosters of firefighters.

There are resources available that provide transitional financing for fire services. For example, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program funds firefighter positions to successful grant recipients for three years. Position funding beyond three years becomes the responsibility of the agency that received the award. If the fire districts could take advantage of similar grants, they might have the breathing room they need to address the fire protection problems they face. In addition, Solano County has received money from the Federal Government that might be used for improved fire protection.

It takes 10 to 20 firefighters to control and extinguish a fire in a single-family house, dependent on the square footage. OSHA Respiratory Protection regulation 1910.134(g)(4) requires two firefighters to enter an Immediately Dangerous to Life and Health (IDLH) atmosphere and remain in visual or voice contact at all times. Additionally, at least two firefighters must be outside the IDLH atmosphere to immediately rescue the firefighters inside the hazardous area if needed. Unless at least four firefighters arrive on the scene of a structure fire, extinguishing efforts must be conducted from the exterior only. Firefighters can, however, perform some rescue activities before the backup crew arrives on the scene.

An average of 13 to 16 fire suppression personnel are required to respond to a large-scale incident like the fires last year that ravaged Solano County. None of the fire districts have the recommended number of firefighters on duty to control and extinguish a fire in a single-family dwelling within their respective districts. Incidents that occur beyond the capability of the on-duty staff cause off duty volunteers to be called and requested to respond for additional help. Neighboring municipal fire departments that have automatic or mutual aid agreements will

dispatch personnel to assist. When even more help is needed, the State Master Mutual Aid System is activated.

As of 2010, approximately 413,000 people were living in Solano County; 395,000 were living in Solano County's seven cities. They receive protection from their respective municipal fire departments. The firefighters in the county FPDs protect the remaining 18,000 residents - a firefighting nightmare.

Fire agencies are seeing an aging workforce. Experienced senior department personnel are retiring or preparing to retire. Large organizations such as public utilities can forecast when and where retirements will likely occur and react to address gaps that would impair the functioning of the organization. The county FPDs have no such resources.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDING 1 – Solano County's Fire Protection Districts are critically understaffed, under equipped, and underfunded to protect rural areas and adjacent cities from this season's wildfires and future wildfires.

RECOMMENDATION 1 – Solano County and the Solano County Local Agency Formation Commission support immediate funding for the four FPDs.

FINDING 2 – While LAFCO is bringing expert advice to the table to determine the path forward to address the increasing danger from wildfires, the pace at which it is going is too slow to address immediate wildfire concerns.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – LAFCO and Solano County separate the more immediate concerns of wildfire exposure and address those with urgency.

FINDING 3 – Transitional financing is needed to equip the FPDs with new equipment and resilient firefighting techniques to adapt to the environmental changes now presented by the combined challenges of extreme heat, drought, and gale force winds along with random power outages.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – Solano County immediately make resources available to the FPDs to deal with the new wildfire environment.

COMMENTS

Solano County has not accepted responsibility for protecting outlying areas from the yearly fires. Without active intervention by the county, addressing fire issues has been glacially and tragically slow.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Solano County Board of Supervisors - All findings

Solano County Local Agency Formation Commission - All findings

All Solano County Fire Protection Districts – All findings

