



SOLANO COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

2021-2022

Solano County Is Not Prepared For Future Emergencies

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Solano County Civil Grand Jury 2021-2022

I. SUMMARY

When a significant portion of a community experiences a large-scale disaster, residents trust that emergency responders have systems in place to coordinate their actions. Cities in Solano County have approved emergency response plans to support people within a specific jurisdiction. However, disasters such as wildfires, hazardous spills, or earthquakes often impact properties across legal boundaries. A weakness in plans in one community can affect people in another. Over the last decade, several agencies have presented studies and reports related to disaster prevention and fire protection to various county jurisdictions in Solano County. Those reports clearly described weaknesses and proposed solutions. Yet the realities have not changed. The Solano County Civil Grand Jury found that a reorganization of responsibilities at the county level would provide a centralized agency to coordinate emergency prevention, management decisions, and actions.

II. INTRODUCTION

Like all counties in California, Solano County is in an area subject to many natural disaster risks and vulnerabilities, including wildfires, droughts, earthquakes, and flooding. Since 2017 there have been eight Disaster Declarations in our county (four fires, two extreme weather, and two disaster declarations for one pandemic). Residents expect attention to prevention, protection, and mitigation of these hazards from their local government, yet many serious events do not observe legal boundary lines. City residents rely on their city departments, including police, fire, public works, and water treatment, for much of their protection. A patchwork of special districts, county departments, and individual property-owner initiatives provide these services for residents in unincorporated areas of Solano County.

A recent fire event demonstrated how a weakness in one section of the County sometimes impacts residents in other jurisdictions. The 2020 Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit (LNU) fire spread rapidly from rural lands to threaten city-regions in the western portions of Vacaville and Fairfield and, ultimately, across Interstate 80. After receiving evacuation warnings, those leaving Fairfield faced gridlock because of Vacaville and Travis Air Force Base traffic, especially on Peabody and Vanden Roads. There is a documented need for more focused attention and funding for countywide planning, prevention, management, and coordination to better prepare for future events.

Unlike other counties in California, Solano County does not have one specific department to manage and coordinate emergency prevention, preparation, and mitigation activities throughout the county. Several departments including the Sheriff's Office, Department of Information Technology (DoIT), Resource Management/Public Works, and the County Administrator are involved, each having their own responsibilities. This year, the Solano County Civil Grand Jury investigated the current situation and the proposed solutions from past studies to evaluate the state of preparedness in Solano County to address future emergencies.

III. METHODOLOGY

Interviewed:

Fairfield Fire Department personnel
Solano County Office of Emergency Services (OES) personnel
Solano County Information Technology personnel
Solano County Sheriff's Office personnel
Sonoma County Administrator Office personnel
Vacaville Fire Department personnel
Vacaville Fire Protection District personnel
Vallejo City personnel
Vallejo Fire Department personnel
Vallejo Police Department personnel

Reviewed:

After-Action Reports:

- Sonoma County: 2018 Tubbs Fire, 2020 Kincade Fire
- CalFire 2020 LNU Fire
- Solano County EOC 2020 LNU After Action Report and Improvement Plan
- Solano County OES 2020 After-Action Report

California legislation:

- California Emergency Services Act, Government Code, Title 2, Chapter 7, 1970-2021
- AB 38 Fire Safety, Defensible Space Inspection (2019)
- SB 99 General Plans: safety element: emergency evacuation routes (2019)

Joint Exercise of Powers of Agreement for Solano County Regional Radio Communications System Authority (Draft)

Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) for all cities and Solano County, 2022 versions.

LAFCO agendas, minutes, MSRs, and special reports:

- 2014 LAFCO: Solano Fire Districts Municipal Service Review
- 2020 LAFCO: Fire Special Study of the four Solano Fire Protection Districts (aka Citygate report)

Solano County Documents:

- Board of Supervisors agendas and minutes
- Recommended and Adopted Budgets, 2021-22
- Fire Prevention Program Grant Applications
- Solano County Emergency Operations Plan, 2017
- Solano County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plans and annexes

Solano County Civil Grand Jury Reports and Responses:

- 2013 Suisun City Fire Protection District
- 2015 Fire Protection: Communication Consolidation
- 2015 Solano County Office of Emergency Services
- 2016 Cordelia Fire Protection District
- 2021 Wildfires on the Horizon, Solano Homes at Risk!

Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management, 2021-22 annual report.

Sonoma County Annual Adopted Budget, 2021-22.

Maps:

- High-fire severity zones in Solano County
- CalFire Districts with State Responsibility Areas (SRAs)
- Solano County Fire Prevention District boundaries
- Evacuation Annex, City of Benicia, 2019
- Evacuation zones and incident map, Sonoma County:
www.socoemergency.org/emergency/evacuation-zones

Newspaper Articles:

- <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/sonoma-county-to-overhaul-emergency-management-program-following-wildfires/>, August 18, 2018, Press Democrat - Sonoma County to overhaul emergency management program following wildfires
- <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/sonoma-county-residents-confident-in-regions-emergency-preparedness-survey/>, August 28, 2021, Press Democrat-- Sonoma County residents confident in region's emergency preparedness, survey finds
- <https://www.wintersexpress.com/city/local-officials-talk-actions-after-lnu-fires-to-improve-emergency-response>, December 3, 2020 - Winters Express - Local Officials Talk Actions After LNU Fires to Improve Emergency Response
- <https://www.timesheraldonline.com/2021/01/18/committee-needs-public-input-for-solano-county-hazard-mitigation-survey/>, January 18, 2021 - Times Herald - Committee needs public input for Solano County hazard mitigation survey
- <https://www.dailyrepublic.com/all-dr-news/solano-news/fairfield/solano-cities-county-cooperate-to-develop-hazard-mitigation-plan-that-includes-climate-change/comment-page-1/>, August 8, 2021 - Daily Republic -Solano cities, county cooperate to develop hazard mitigation plan that includes climate change
- <https://www.dailyrepublic.com/all-dr-news/solano-news/fairfield/fairfield-suisun-city-officials-declare-state-of-emergency-due-to-virus-spread/comment-page-1/>, March 18, 2020 - Daily Republic -Fairfield, Suisun City officials declare state of emergency due to virus spread
- <https://www.thereporter.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-vacaville-city-council-approves-local-emergency-declaration/> March 25, 2020 - Vacaville Reporter - Coronavirus: Vacaville City Council approves local emergency declaration

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

Over the past ten years, Solano County Civil Grand Juries and other agencies have issued many reports alerting public officials and residents about the need for better preparation for disasters and the inadequacy of fire protection in rural areas. Recommendations included fire district consolidation, better communications, and implementation of a shared, fully-staffed dispatch system. Most of the reports called for action, conveyed a sense of urgency and expressed a need for leadership at the county level to coordinate activities. A summary of these reports and their recommendations is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Recommendations 2013 through 2022

Report Year, Agency and Title	Fire District Consolidation	Improved Communications	Critical Need/Sense of Urgency	Umbrella Leadership Role for County
2013 Solano County Civil Grand Jury: Suisun Fire Protection District	X		X	X
2015 Solano County Civil Grand Jury: Fire Protection: Communication Consolidation	X	X	X	X
2015 Solano County Civil Grand Jury: Solano County Office of Emergency Services		X	X	
2016 Solano County Civil Grand Jury: Cordelia Fire Protection District	X		X	
2021 Solano County Civil Grand Jury: Wildfires On the Horizon, Solano Homes at Risk!	X		X	X
2014 LAFCO: Solano Fire Districts Municipal Service Review		X	X	X
2020 LAFCO: Fire Special Study (aka Citygate report) of the four Solano Fire Protection Districts	X		X	X
2017 Solano OES (a division of the Sheriff's Office): County Emergency Operations Plan (online doc)		X	X	
2022 Solano County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (addresses many potential hazards such as wildfire, flood, earthquake, climate change, and extreme weather events.)			X	X
2020 LNU Fire Solano County Emergency Operations Center After Action Report and Improvement Plan		X	X	X

The listed reports made various recommendations to address the identified issues. As of April 2022 attempts to address the shortcomings include:

- In 2021, the Board of Supervisors adopted a Resolution of Application to LAFCO to reorganize the Cordelia and Vacaville Fire Protection Districts and a portion of the Suisun Fire Protection District into a single district. LAFCO should be hearing the resolution sometime this year.
- Solano County and its cities are exploring adoption of a uniform communication system through a Joint Powers Agreement.
- The Solano County Fire Chiefs Association holds regular meetings to discuss common issues and solutions.
- The Office of Emergency Services (OES) received grants in November 2021 to establish a Countywide Fire Safe Council and hire a coordinator to support fire prevention efforts.
- Solano County and its cities adopted the revised Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (MJHMP) and its Annexes. This step augments Solano County's ability to qualify for future grants.
- The Board of Supervisors is discussing a general fund tax increase to provide general county services such as adding fire protection and prevention and general government uses.

These actions indicate a continuing interest in addressing current weaknesses, although few solutions have been implemented.

No single office/department in Solano County is currently designated as responsible for tracking and resolving the issues identified in the reports listed above. Many California counties and larger cities have an identified Emergency Management Department with responsibility for coordination of prevention, preparation, mitigation, response and recovery activities related to large-scale emergencies and disasters. In 2018, the Tubbs Fire After-Action report in Sonoma County noted that 10 California counties had independent Emergency Management departments.

Based on recommendations in that report, Sonoma County made changes in their organization of county services related to emergencies, consolidating several responsibilities into a new department, providing a nearby example of how such a department functions. According to the 2019 Kincade Fire After-Action Report and Improvement Plan, "The County reorganized the Fire and Emergency Services Department, forming the Department of Emergency Management as an independent County department in July 2019, reporting to the County Administrator. The department is led by the Director of Emergency Management, who has the authorities of a Department Head." This new department serves as the primary coordination point between cities and the county for emergency situations.

In the current fiscal year 2021-2022, Sonoma's Department of Emergency Management (DEM) has eleven employees and a budget of \$6.9 million. It receives 35% of its funding from the

General Fund. The department budget represents 0.7% of the total county budget. There are two full-time grant writers whose efforts have brought in up to \$4 million per year in grants.

According to the Sonoma County Budget adopted in 2021-22, “The Department of Emergency Management leads and coordinates major countywide programs including community disaster preparedness, public education, government staff development, response planning, alert and warning, incident response management, and short-term recovery. The Department develops and sustains effective relationships with residents, County departments, cities, special districts, state and federal agencies, community-based organizations, and other allied stakeholder organizations.”

At the time of the 2017 Tubbs fire, Sonoma County had an emergency services division within another department. The County now reports that combining several existing positions into a single department has resulted in better coordination in four functional areas:

- Administrative Services - DEM is responsible for grants administration and provides the Department’s fiscal, human resources, logistics, and administrative services.
- Emergency Coordination and Management - DEM is responsible for developing emergency response plans, training for County staff and Operational Area jurisdictions, maintaining the County’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC) facility/organization, and supporting the development of hazard mitigation strategies.
- Community Preparedness - DEM develops individual, family, neighborhood, community, and private sector disaster preparedness through targeted outreach, public education, and engagement.
- Community Alert & Warning - DEM maintains the 24/7 communications technology, policies, training, and multi-jurisdictional coordination that enable the delivery of public warnings.

One local concern related to emergency planning mentioned in several interviews with the Solano County Civil Grand Jury is the state of publicized evacuation routes in most of Solano County. No city other than Benicia has included evacuation routes in their emergency plans. During the 2020 Solano LNU Fire, many residents experienced gridlock on surface streets between cities while trying to follow evacuation orders.

The Sonoma County Kincade Fire After-Action Report published in 2020 included two findings that were not noted in any local After-Action document following the LNU fire but described a similar situation. They are:

- “A disconnect remains between the County, the OA (*Operational Area*), and local governments causing gaps in coordination and information-sharing.”
- “The county does not have a functional evacuation plan and repopulation plan.”

By May 2021, the Sonoma County DEM was able to address both issues using current organizational structure. Sonoma County and incorporated cities established standardized evacuation zones and routes, taking into account the topography and traffic patterns in the region. Previously, evacuation zones had been different for each incident. Zones now are

specific, smaller neighborhood areas that remain constant, and residents are urged to learn their evacuation zones and be ready to go when an evacuation order is issued. The zones are compact; the city of Santa Rosa has over 25 zones. New maps show evacuation zones for unincorporated areas in Sonoma County as well as the incorporated communities. A system coordinated by DEM distributed Evacuation Packs through organized neighborhood groups and at county libraries to publicize the process. The packs are available in English and Spanish and include a personal emergency plan template, evacuation checklist, and tips for power shutoffs. During the recent fire events of 2021, residents received notifications specific to their zone number to alert them of potential dangers and when to get ready, if necessary, to evacuate.

In Solano County, the 2022 adoption of a revised County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan (MJHMP) represents a positive step toward countywide coordination. This update represents the first time all municipalities have joined with the County plan and provides the groundwork for qualifying for grant funding. The plan identifies 44 specific mitigations for Solano County in addition to specific actions for each local jurisdiction. These address all hazards with an estimated cost for each step. A steering committee of county emergency professionals and others oversaw the plan's development and made recommendations on key elements.

To illustrate the level of detail in the current plan, an example of a wildfire mitigation action is below:

Hazard Type	Mitigation Type	Status	Year	Title/Description	Responsible Party	Est. Cost	Est. Benefit	Time Frame	Priority
Wildfire	Prevention, Public Education & Awareness, Emergency Service	Pending	2021	Establish egress routes from Travis Air Force Base; potential routes include Walters Road to Hwy 12	Solano County	Low-Funded under existing budget. Can be part of existing program.	High- Provide immediate reduction of risk exposure for life and property.	1-3 years	High

Note: As a living document, project descriptions and actions in the table will be modified to reflect current conditions over time. We have included only a small part of the Public Draft of the Solano County Multi-Jurisdictional Plan.

With adoption of the MJHMP, Solano County and participating jurisdictions are now responsible for its implementation and maintenance. There is no department identified as a single point of responsibility for overall implementation.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDING 1 – Solano County needs a countywide approach to Emergency Management to coordinate emergency planning and response activities before, during, and after a major disaster or emergency incident.

RECOMMENDATION 1 – Consolidate all existing Solano County emergency management, planning, and prevention services into one Department of Emergency Management, providing an umbrella to coordinate existing county and city functions related to emergency and disaster events.

FINDING 2 - There is a need for a coordinated city and countywide evacuation plan for Solano County.

RECOMMENDATION 2a – Develop compatible evacuation zones and routes throughout the county.

RECOMMENDATION 2b – Create public awareness of evacuation zones and routes.

COMMENT 1 - With the economy badly damaged by the COVID pandemic, those searching for solutions to address the emergency needs of our community need to look beyond new taxes, which could exacerbate the already fragile personal financial health of many Solano County residents. There are state and national financial sources for emergency prevention and preparedness which the County must thoroughly explore and implement first. Solano County must seriously consider hiring dedicated grant writers to provide the necessary funding to address emergency needs. Our neighbor, Sonoma County, faced similar issues and has hired grant writers whose work has since been instrumental in funding most of the changes and improvements to its emergency safety measures.

COMMENT 2 - More wildfires will occur locally in areas that cross district and city boundary lines. In interviews with fire chiefs, the Solano County Civil Grand Jury heard “Predictable is preventable” and “Someone has to be the parent.” As local rural fire districts struggle to maintain equipment and keep training current for volunteers and professional firefighters, their situations impact all areas of the county. With every new city annexation, the rural fire district losing the annexed area also loses property tax revenues. Although each affected fire district receives mitigation payments at the time of annexation, it will face a loss of regular income once those have ceased. A Solano County Department of Emergency Management, including dedicated grant writers, would take the lead in clarifying responsibilities between agencies and look for a long-term solution, using grant funds as appropriate to support the process.

COMMENT 3 - During an evacuation or a significant highway disruption, residents rely on the ability to move out of a dangerous area. Well-designed, safe roadways are essential to the process. In Solano County, several roads serve as alternate routes between cities when Interstate 80 is not available or has limited access, including Jepson Parkway and Columbus Parkway. As cities approve new developments along sections of those roads, the developers and cities reach agreements about the deadlines for completion of needed roadway improvements. Cities vary in their expectations. While some areas of these roads are improved early in the construction phase, other sections are not scheduled for improvement until a significant number of housing units are

completed. The Solano County Civil Grand Jury heard specific concerns in 2022 about traffic safety on Vanden Road near Canon Road, in Fairfield, and Columbus Parkway between Regents Park Drive and Benicia Road, in Vallejo. As the region moves to improve evacuation plans, jurisdictions should pay increased attention to deadlines for completion of these impacted roadways so the routes can handle traffic during an emergency.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Solano County Board of Supervisors (All Findings)
Solano County Administrator's Office (All Findings)
City Council and Manager (Finding 2)
Benicia
Dixon
Fairfield
Rio Vista
Suisun City
Vacaville
Vallejo

COURTESY COPIES

Solano County Sheriff
OES Director
City and District Fire Chiefs
Benicia
Dixon
Fairfield
Rio Vista
Suisun City
Vacaville
Vacaville Fire Protection District
Vallejo
Police Department Administration
Benicia
Dixon
Fairfield
Rio Vista
Suisun City
Vacaville
Vallejo
Solano County LAFCO
Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management Administration