



Published August 5th, 2020

Grand jury directs fire agencies to update evacuation plans

By Nick Marnell

Years of major, destructive California wildfires got the attention of a Contra Costa County civil grand jury, which released a report on county preparedness should the county face a catastrophic wildfire within its boundaries. The panel particularly emphasized the need for the region to update evacuation plans and to incorporate advanced routing technology.

Contra Costa County's civil grand jury comprises 19 citizens who investigate the operations of government agencies. It is in the sole discretion of the grand jury to determine what government functions it investigates. For the June wildfire preparedness report, the grand jury interviewed county fire personnel, including Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker, who said he spent six hours at one of the hearings.

The grand jury found that many of the eight county fire agencies lacked updated wildfire evacuation plans and directed that the fire agencies should incorporate advanced routing technology to determine the most efficient evacuation routes for residents. An example it gave was to divide the evacuation area into grids and map all roads, access points and evacuation centers within each section.

The grand jury noted that a solid evacuation plan not only allows smooth resident evacuation but also allows emergency equipment and personnel to better respond to the fire. The panel found no fault with the MOFD evacuation plan.

Because MOFD has in place many of the procedures proposed by the grand jury, the district was ordered to respond to only two of the seven grand jury recommendations; three of the recommendations, however, were duplicated between county fire districts and fire departments.

One of the grand jury recommendations regards the expansion of new technologies, such as ground sensors, drones and satellites, to help detect wildfires in high-risk areas. Though the district has been in the forefront of using such technologies, Winnacker agreed with the recommendation.

"There's always room to better integrate these functions into our systems," he said.

The other panel recommendation to the district was to consider a mechanism like the ordinance passed by the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, which would enable a fire agency to recover labor and equipment costs from an electric utility for overseeing the company's electrical work when it presents a high fire risk.

However, the San Ramon Valley Fire ordinance, and the district's right to issue fines or citations over ordinance violations, have been challenged in court.

"I agree with the grand jury recommendations," Winnacker said. "They will help move the region to a safer fire future. We will do anything to improve regional safety."

Because of the pressure on public agencies due to COVID-19, the grand jury gave until June 30 for fire agencies to respond to its findings and recommendations.

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