

BACK-COUNTRY FIRE PROTECTION WHERE WE ARE TODAY

SUMMARY

San Diego County Officials have made great strides improving the firefighting capability in the unincorporated or “back-country” areas of the County. The 2014/2015 San Diego County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) believes that work is worthy of commendation. More needs to be done.

In 2003 and again in 2007 major back-country wild fires that started in San Diego County made it clear to officials that reorganization was paramount. County leaders, working with the San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), created the San Diego County Fire Authority (SDCFA).

The SDCFA provides support for unifying the administration, communications, training and equipping of rural fire agencies. It also extends around-the-clock protection to those areas of the backcountry that previously had either limited or part-time on-call protection. In addition, the SDCFA has contracted with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFIRE) to extend the scope of its fire protection services and contracted with various agencies to augment existing aerial firefighting assets.

There are still some missing pieces:

- During the fire-fighting effort for the Cocos fire in 2014, fire crews encountered a hydrant that was reported as “not working.” The hydrant was fixed after the fire but that raises questions as to why it wasn’t identified and repaired before the fire.
- One of the underlying concepts of establishing the County Fire Authority was to provide support to backcountry fire agencies. Currently 13¹ of the 28² agencies that provide fire protection to the backcountry have not entered into agreements with the County Fire Authority. These agencies cover approximately 500,000 acres³ or about 22% of the unincorporated area of the County.

The Grand Jury recommends that, in order to improve the fire-fighting capability of the County Fire Authority, the County should partner with all back-country fire agencies that haven’t signed agreements (including those on Indian tribal lands) to determine how best to consolidate their organizations under the governance of the County Fire Authority.

¹ San Diego County Fire Authority Fire Master Plan dated July 2013

² San Diego County General Plan Update Environmental Impact Report (EIR) of August 2011

³ San Diego County General Plan Update EIR of August 2011

INTRODUCTION

The Grand Jury explored two issues:

- How did the new organizational approach work during the 2014 wildfires and what were the lessons learned?
- What is the status of the consolidation effort to improve firefighting by bringing backcountry fire agencies under the governance of the County Fire Authority?

PROCEDURE

The Grand Jury interviewed:

- Senior County Fire Authority personnel;
- Personnel from backcountry fire agencies;
- Senior staff from a backcountry water district; and
- A member of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors.

The Grand Jury visited:

- A backcountry fire station; and
- The County Emergency Operations Center.

The Grand Jury reviewed the following:

- The May 2014 San Diego County Wildfires After-Action Report;
- The May 2014 City of San Diego Bernardo Fire After-Action Report;
- San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) reports on Reorganization of Structural Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Service in Unincorporated San Diego County;
- The July 2013 Fire Master Plan for the San Diego County Fire Authority;
- The San Diego County General Plan Update Environmental Impact Report of August 2011;
- The County Fire Authority web site; and
- Previous Grand Jury Reports.

DISCUSSION

Progress to Date

1. The County has made significant progress in improving the firefighting capability since the 2003 and 2007 wildland fires. It has adopted the strategy of leaving backcountry fire agencies in place and supporting them in a manner to bring fire protection service to a standard level across the backcountry. This approach is intended to improve fire protection while at the same time minimize the cost to taxpayers. Some of the actions taken to date are:
 - a. Established the County Fire Authority and consolidated backcountry fire agencies covering approximately 78%⁴ of the unincorporated land.

⁴ San Diego County Fire Authority Fire Master Plan dated July 2013

- b. Entered into a contract with CALFIRE to extend its existing services to provide more support for the back-country fire protection effort. The contract with CALFIRE expanded its services year-round and allowed CALFIRE to augment fire stations that were previously operated on an “on-call” basis.
 - c. Entered into a contract with CALFIRE to provide senior staff for the County Fire Authority. This allows CALFIRE, with its expertise in fighting wildland fires, to oversee the training and equipping of backcountry fire stations.
 - d. Added volunteer firefighters to provide around-the-clock protection for fire stations that were operated on an “on-call” basis.
 - e. Purchased firefighting equipment to augment existing equipment at backcountry fire stations.
 - f. Provided funding to improve physical conditions at backcountry fire stations.
 - g. Purchased aerial firefighting assets for direct use by the County Fire Authority.
2. In addition, the County has entered into agreements with the City of San Diego, San Diego Gas & Electric and the Military to make available their aerial assets as needed. This greatly increases the capability to combat fires as they start to grow.

Lessons Learned

1. During the fire-fighting effort for the May 2014 Cocos fire, crews were told not to use a hydrant in the area of the fire since it was “not working.” The hydrant was working but it only produced “high pressure” water and needed fire-fighting equipment capable of reducing the pressure before it was safe to use. This situation was known to the fire agency for many years but never addressed to the water district that it needed to be fixed or labeled as high pressure. The fix was accomplished after the fact.
 - a. This is an example of the type of problem the County Fire Authority can discover and correct before the next fire.
 - b. The County Fire Authority should survey all backcountry fire agencies to see what kinds of problems they face and determine if there are improvements and/or assistance needed.
2. Both San Diego City and County After-Action reports for the North County fires of May 2014 made reference to problems with their communications systems. For the County, this involved excessive busy signals.

Status of Consolidation Effort

1. The County Fire Authority has signed agreements with or consolidated 15 of the 28 back-county fire agencies to operate under its governance. This covers approximately 78% of the unincorporated County area. Even though the fire agencies that make up the remaining 22% all have mutual aid agreements with the

- County and each other, consolidating under the County Fire Authority umbrella has some distinct advantages for both:
- a. During a fire the ground and air attack could be better coordinated under one organization.
 - b. All fire agencies could receive the same training.
 - c. All fire agencies could have appropriate equipment for their area of responsibility regardless of their fund raising ability.
 - d. The County Fire Authority could pre-position equipment at any appropriate location.
 - e. There could be one database of water sources, equipment, labor, and other assets available at each agency so the County Fire Authority could develop plans and deploy a coordinated effort when needed.
 - f. The County Fire Authority could provide specialized services that are burdensome for small agencies, such as:
 - i. Purchasing and contracting;
 - ii. Standardization of equipment;
 - iii. Dispatch services;
 - iv. Data collection needed to determine locations for new fire stations County-wide rather than by individual fire agency;
 - v. Efficient allocation of specialized equipment that could be shared with other fire agencies based on need;
 - vi. Business services for paying invoices, tracking budgets, etc.; and
 - vii. Vehicle maintenance.
 - g. The County Fire Authority could develop and implement a plan to cover those “islands” of the County that are unserved by any fire protection agency.
2. The County Fire Authority should also consider entering into agreements with Indian tribal fire agencies to take advantage of the added coordination available during a wildland fire.

FACTS AND FINDINGS

Fact: The County Board of Supervisors established the County Fire Authority to provide firefighting services for the backcountry.

Fact: The County Fire Authority added assets and capabilities to backcountry fire stations.

Fact: The County Fire Authority added aerial assets and as-needed agreements for additional aerial assets.

Finding 01: San Diego County significantly increased its ability to fight fires in the backcountry since the 2003 and 2007 wildfires.

Fact: Thirteen (13) backcountry fire agencies representing approximately 22% of the unincorporated area of the county have not agreed to consolidate or enter into agreements with the County Fire Authority.

Fact: Back-country fire agencies are typically not staffed to perform certain specialized services such as purchasing and contracting, vehicle maintenance, business services, etc., that could be performed more effectively by the County.

Fact: The May 2014 Cocos fire identified a problem with water availability from backcountry fire hydrants that could have been corrected before the fire.

Fact: The May 2014 San Diego County Wildfires After-Action Report lists problems with communications.

Finding 02: The County Fire Authority still has work to do to complete the reorganization and improve backcountry firefighting capability.

COMMENDATION

The 2014/2015 San Diego County Grand Jury commends the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and the Chief Administrative Officer for making significant improvements to date in the ability of the County to fight fires in the unincorporated areas while at the same time minimizing the cost to taxpayers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2014/2015 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the San Diego County Chief Administrative Officer:

15-03: Consolidate or establish agreements between the County Fire Authority and all backcountry fire agencies (including Indian Tribal agencies if possible) in order to maximize fire protection services to the backcountry.

15-04: Identify and offer specialized services (such as vehicle maintenance, purchasing and contracting, business services, etc.) to backcountry fire agencies for the benefit of existing partners and to encourage other agencies to join the County Fire Authority.

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made no later than 90 days after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case

of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made within 60 days to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
 - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with Penal Code §933.05 are required from:

Responding Agency	Recommendations	Due Date
San Diego County Chief Administrative Officer	15-03, 15-04	08/10/15