



# MOSQUITO FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

8801 Rock Creek Road,  
Placerville, CA 95667

August 13, 2020

Honorable Suzanne N. Kingsbury  
Presiding Judge of the El Dorado County Superior Court  
1354 Johnson Boulevard  
South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150

Dear Judge Kingsbury,

The Mosquito Fire Protection District has received the recent Grand Jury Report on fire districts, titled "WEST SLOPE FIRE PROTECTION UPDATE, "Grand Jury Case No. 19-06. On behalf of the board of directors, I thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Mosquito Fire Protection District has carefully considered the report, the methodology, its findings and

each of the recommendations submitted by the Grand Jury. As a respondent to this report, Mosquito Fire Protection District hereby respectfully submits this response.

## Findings

F1. Long term fiscal sustainability of fire protection on the West Slope of the County is highly questionable.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District disagrees partially with finding.

Long term fiscal sustainability on the West Slope of the County is a challenge each District faces. There is no "single" solution. The needs of each District differ based on the demographics, level of development, and population. This produces a spectrum of fire prevention and defense strategies ranging from predominantly rural (wildland fire) to urban (structural) with the expectation that how a District responds is the key to success.

MFPD sustained a significant loss when the County withdrew "Aid to Fire", a program that was created to equalize revenue allocations that were not supported through the various traditional tax allocation systems of funding.

MFPD has been able to maintain an active presence in the community, remain debt free, and in the last two years, experience a growth in funding streams. This was accomplished by virtue of dedicated fire fighters (paid and volunteer), an active Board, an engaged community, and networking relationships with neighboring Districts. MFPD agrees that dollars are critical and would love to see the reallocation of resources other redress of tax allocations. MFPD is determined to continue to serve the community in a professional

and effective capacity. Your assertion of unattainable sustainability only looks at a dollar equation and does not include the value of community effort.

F2. County citizens on the West Slope experience a wide disparity in fire protection services often masked by Automatic Aid, based on their location and their specific fire district.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District disagrees partially with finding.

Mosquito Fire Protection District, like many California Rural Districts, is in a California State Responsibility Area, (SRA) for wildland response with augmentation by our local fire district for structure and emergency medical response. El Dorado National Forest lands border our district on the north and east. Bureau of Land Management lands to the south. We are often the “call to agency” for federal lands yet compensation is to the County General Fund and not to our district. Additionally, our department is called upon by El Dorado County Transportation, El Dorado County Sheriff for various non fire related support. We do not recover by billing our time/equipment use for these informal “mutual aid” activities.

The level of funding for emergency services (which is county funded) is a “backdoor subsidy” for “transporting departments”. The county via the Joint Powers Authority (JPA) provides 1.2 million dollars to each ambulance to specific departments. Non transporting agencies (rural fire departments) receive minimal “stipends” at the discretion of the JPA board of Directors. We are one of the founding agencies of the El Dorado County JPA. For the past two years we received no funding. Historically we are assessed a cost of dispatch percentage to support JPA dispatch costs. We continued to offer response and BLS services without any financial support from the county contracted agency, JPA.

Mosquito is part of Cal Fire Camino Emergency Dispatch Center via the JPA therefore participates and responds using procedures of ECC Emergency Mutual Aid System county fire agencies “move up and cover” “automatic aid” agreements. To the extent county fire departments and Cal Fire agencies respond to ALL emergency calls using CalFire dispatch, SRA and USFS cooperative agreements, we receive and provide response support. A careful read of the 2019 Cal Fire Camino Emergency Command Center Report indicates our district’s requesting and responding calls are nearly equal. (115 vs 112).

The Chili Bar Fire and the King Fire (both originating out of Mosquito Fire Protection District service area) sets standards for cooperation from all Federal, State and Local Fire agencies. Some of our district costs were reimbursed, some not.

Our district is required to use the El Dorado County financial system (Auditor, Assessor and Treasurer) for which we are billed annually. When the county expenses are increased, those are passed to our agency. We, as do the county agencies, suffer from

“unfunded” demands on our revenues. We are separately paying for an annual district auditor (\$3,000.00)

F3. Efforts to improve fire protection on the West Slope of the County have been ongoing for many years with limited success.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District agrees with finding.

Mosquito Fire Protection District, Georgetown Fire Protection District & Garden Valley Fire Protection District have historically cooperated since district formation in 1979. The Mosquito Fire Protection District and the Garden Valley Fire Protection District signed a formal Shared Services/Mutual Aid agreement for years 2016,2017, 2018 and 2019. More and more “formalized” and governmental demands have hampered previous Chief to Chief, District to District response, equipment support/repair/training/drilling. To a large extent the impact of multiple local union structures and nonunion firefighters also contribute to a challenging cooperative climate.

Our district engaged in consolidation discussions for the past two- and one-half years. The basic problem with these efforts is financial and keeping locally based staffing. How ironic the 1-person 24/7 staffing proposed and rejected for our district is now in place for the Garden Valley Fire Protection District. In spite of pressure from the County and LAFCO, this option did not (and does not) make fiscal sense or provide improved community coverage Combining two “insolvent companies” does not make for one solvent company.

MFPD did not stop moving forward during the consolidation conversation. To the contrary, it was clear that Mosquito was not going to receive the services necessary to preserve our way of life. MFPD secured several grants for equipment and one large grant (\$750,000 spanning a four-year period) for Volunteer Recruitment, Training, and Retention. Enhancing and augmenting our ability to deliver enhanced EMS services via a \$175,000.00 paramedic grant. Discussions with neighboring Districts about unused vehicles and equipment continue with feedback denoting support among the smaller Districts

Improved protection is NOT limited to the aspect of firefighting alone. A grant secured through the efforts of Mosquito Fire Safe Council for brush reduction on Rock Creek Rd. (a county road responsibility) and extending into Swansboro Country Property Owners (SCPOA) subdivision with a fuel break tying back to Mosquito Rd. (a county road responsibility ) was obtained and implemented. This grant was close to \$500,000 and performed under the management of Mark Egbert – El Dorado County Resource Conservation District. This required community support with “in kind” contributions as well as access to private lands for roadside mastication. The results are amazing. Obtaining outside financial support has been practiced in the Mosquito Fire Protection District since 2003. The limiting factor ... funds availability.

MFPD recognizes that all efforts will need to be ongoing and change with the needs of the community and the health of the environment. Availability of resources such as water change with demand. Draw down of water tables and diversion of water resources are significant factors. Land use changes in the past year has prompted more 'farming' activity, specifically legalized marijuana. MFPD urged Don Ashton, CAO (at an "all District" meeting) to consider including permit fees for districts located in potential 'grow' areas to offset the impact on the area both in time and resources. El Dorado County adoption of Prop 64 provision without financial consideration of the increased calls for service and other potential impact to rural fire districts again demonstrates less than a holistic view of the costs to fire service.

Improvements to fire protection on the West Slope should not be contemplated in a static mode. There have been improvements, especially in technology, communications, and coordination. It is ever changing. The County continues to develop, and people build - expansion needs to increase and change fire protection coverage. The County approves the permits but then falls back on "the County is not in the Fire Protection business". The irony is that the County then acts "surprised" that smaller Districts are not able to keep up with the demand and labels them as "failing". MFPD understood the message – do not expect help from the County.

It is erroneous however to suggest that "improvements to fire protection on the West Slope have had limited success". Climate change, fire behavior, environmental devastation from earlier fires, fuel (brush) overload – all these are factors in the equation. There is no one way to package this into a neat little box that will be cost effective and provide the level of service most districts now receive which appears to be your desire.

Finding F4. Cal Fire has the infrastructure, staffing and expertise to be a major component of a solution to the County's fire district disparities.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District disagrees partially with finding.

Cal Fire has the infrastructure, staffing and expertise to be a major component of a solution to the County's fire district disparities. The professional expertise offered by CalFire is not questioned. However, it does not solve the financial crisis. Attempting to phase CalFire into the District as a long-term component contributes a more onerous burden due to the increased costs of personnel and higher equipment/infrastructure requirements for our district. We are a non-CalPERS agency. As such we have no unfunded liabilities. We offer a retirement plan and health benefits. We have reviewed the CalFire Amador Plan. That program would require additional revenues which would require more than triple our current tax and voter approved special assessment of \$204.00. The district has no ability to change the tax rates allocated. This option was also evaluated by Cal Fire within the context of the consolidation discussions. CalFire unequivocally stated there was no way they could adequately cover Mosquito's fire protection needs. A preliminary figure of a million dollars was mentioned with the caveat they would respond from Garden Valley base with limited presence in Mosquito.

The station in Garden Valley is 45 minutes away and as stated in LAFCO study session on the "State of Fire Districts in El Dorado County" and as is generally recognized, a fire growth is exponential and the best outcome has a window of only 7 to 11 minutes. Responding from out of District is 4 to 5 times longer. CalFire is a great partner and Mosquito values the working relationship that exists between the two agencies. Clearly CalFire is the dominant player in all of California fire prevention activity and as such, obtains support from the governor's office. This does not translate to being entrenched in the community and responding to their needs which extend beyond firefighting.

Finding F5. Improvements in the existing fire protection model for the West Slope requires all fire protection districts to take a holistic view of fire protection and the political will to embrace change.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District Board of Directors disagree with this finding

MFPD feels the phrase "holistic view" is another term for "one size fits all" which is a part of the fallacy that led to the current situation. All of the West Slope fire districts are different. El Dorado County embraces a multitude of unique areas (South Lake Tahoe, Kyburz, Georgetown Divide, Cool and Pilot Hill, Lotus, Mosquito, Placerville, Grizzly Flats, Somerset, Pioneer, Cameron Park, Shingle Springs, to name a few.) Communities along the Highway 50 corridor share urban characteristics including more commercial development. South Lake Tahoe is a tourist destination with hotels and casinos. Outlying areas often are home to farms that have been in existence since the 1800s as well as newer farming activities including Apple Hill, wineries, and organic farms. It is evident that each area is unique - fiscally, geographically, population spread and nature of housing or surrounding terrain. Urban and rural firefighting districts share traits but are not the same. Urban areas experience far more medical calls with fire calls often being contained to a single structure. Rural areas have medical calls, but the threat of a wildfire requires a more comprehensive approach.

Historically Mosquito has been here for a long time, the people of this district were casting ballots in the election when Abraham Lincoln was elected. More recently the creation of the housing development, Swansboro Country Property Owners Association (SCPOA) was approved by the county.

It would be interesting to see the Grand Jury's proposed holistic approach presented in operational detail since it is difficult to imagine what it would look like -- especially when the fiscal component is considered.

Fire protection in El Dorado County has been an issue of discussion for decades. Previous Grand Juries and LAFCO have completed studies. The results have not changed the playing field. There is no equity in funding. Aid to Fire was a form of financial support to many smaller districts but no longer exists. There is no single solution.

MFPD agrees with the concept of strong partnerships and providing support to neighboring districts and continues to be a contributing member to the firefighting community. Training events that have involved individuals from outside our immediate area have been provided. MFPD has collaborated with other districts in seeking grants (currently participating with Georgetown FPD in a grant and with Rescue FPD in another grant) as well as providing information regarding the importance of prevention and brush reduction. MFPD has a history of embracing change and has demonstrated amazing creativity in keeping up with changes in technology with no new funding from the county.

F6. Fire protection districts on the West Slope have not displayed the ability to take a holistic view of fire protection or the political will to embrace change, to the detriment of all County citizens.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District Board of Directors disagree with this finding.

Fire districts, although individually unique, have a strong history of collaboration. They understand the need for comprehensive coverage and professional relationships since fires do not adhere to containment by artificial boundaries on a map. Unique characteristics are pride of stature within their District does not mean lack of cooperation. There is a holistic view by the fire agencies who continue to support and respond to all our needs. We believe the fire agencies do maintain and respond in a holistic fashion. This does not necessarily mean a financially holistic view nor is there a holistic view in the actions of the County of El Dorado Board of Supervisors, who also have a responsibility to ensure its citizens are adequately provided with emergency medical services and are protected against fire hazards.

Notwithstanding the lack of financial support from the County and pressure from agencies that do not take a comprehensive look at improving the system but focus on cost cutting measures, the high quality of fire protection service that exists within our county is a result of each fire district working to protect their community and assist their neighboring districts. Therein is the meaning of holistic “concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection into parts”.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Response R1. Fire Protection Districts, Cal Fire, BOS and LAFCO should continue discussing ways to improve County fire protection services.

Response: Mosquito Fire Protection District Board of Directors believes recommendation requires further analysis.

We welcome the completion of a Cortese-Knox Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 Municipal Service Review. The MFPD proposes that over

the next year, it will analyze the effects of consolidation on key factors including level of service and fire protection capability.

MFPD can have a role to play in these ongoing discussions. We will continue to participate to improve fire protection and emergency services for the members of the district with the goal of providing protections within the District comparable to other county fire protection. However, it is currently still unclear as to how consolidation will affect level of service metrics in Mosquito including:

1. As outlined in the MFPD response to Grand Jury Case No. 07-025 2008
  - i) A 9-minute average response time for emergency equipment to arrive on scene
  - ii) A 5-minute average response time for a Command Officer to arrive on scene.
  - iii) A 15-minute average response time for on-scene arrival of additional personnel and equipment
  - iv) Personnel responding to medical calls for service trained to a minimum level of EMT with Combe Tube certification.
  - v) An ISO rating of 5 in those areas served by fire hydrants and a rating of 8 in those areas not served by hydrants.
  - vi) Station 75 staffed with at least two trained, emergency response person during normal business hours 7 days a week 24 hours a day and opened to the public for information for at least 5 hours a day M-F.
2. As referenced in the LAFCO September 2018, Agenda Item #8: "Study Session On The State Of Fire Districts In The County And Options For Finances And Alternative Governance Models" pages 4-6 effects of consolidation on key factors including level of service and fire protection capability.

We thank the Grand Jury for its time and attention to this matter.

Regards



Barbara Mikel  
President, Mosquito Fire Protection District

BAM/sf