

READ AND CONSIDERED

DATE

4/4/15

BY



OCTOBER FIRE EMERGENCY RESPONSE

"This was their finest hour!"

SUMMARY

The Civil Grand Jury concentrated its investigation on the response to the firestorm emergency. This report focuses on the considerable efforts of the front-line Sonoma County and City emergency response units.

The Civil Grand Jury recognizes that the complexity of many emergency agencies responding and the scope and rapidity of the fires created significant challenges to efficient and effective communications. County agencies were in a tactical mode, locating and evacuating people as quickly as possible. The Tubbs fire advanced rapidly. The call to evacuate the Fountaingrove area was made by one experienced, knowledgeable City Fire Marshall who boldly took the initiative based on experience, expertise and sound judgment.

Sonoma County has 43 individual fire districts that are functionally independent. The Civil Grand Jury often heard the opinion that a differently organized county fire system would be better able to respond to complex emergencies. The existing system evolved in an earlier, more rural county. The California Fire Chiefs Association recommends that counties and the state develop a proactive system rather than a reactive system. The current reactive system sends resources after an emergency is already happening. A proactive system would pre-position resources during high alert times and be better prepared for a timely response.

The 2004-2005 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury issued a report, "A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN", which examined the state of emergency preparedness one decade after the adoption of Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS). The report predicted disaster under the then-existing conditions. The current Civil Grand Jury sees many parallels between the analyses and predictions of 2005 and the current issues in Sonoma County.

The emergency management system in Sonoma County follows the standards based on the state and federal Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Within SEMS, Emergency Operation Centers (EOCs) provide a centralized location for emergency management coordination and decision-making during a critical incident, emergency, or disaster.

Each jurisdiction creates its own emergency management plan with guidelines to activate an EOC. During the fires, EOCs were activated by: Sonoma County, Santa Rosa, City of Sonoma, Rohnert Park, Petaluma, Healdsburg and Cloverdale, as well as Sonoma State University and Santa Rosa Junior College.

City Managers usually serve as the EOC Director and department heads lead the four main EOC areas mentioned above. The Sonoma County Code of Ordinances designates the County Administrator as the director of emergency services and that person serves as County EOC Director.

The Red Cross historically provides shelter management. They arrived late because they were finishing operations elsewhere in the state. In Santa Rosa, the initial designated shelter was the Finley Center. It reached capacity by 3:45 am on October 9. The Veteran's Building in Santa Rosa was open by then to accept more evacuees. Many more shelters were set up elsewhere in the county including Petaluma, Sonoma Valley, Rohnert Park and Sebastopol.

Three technological alert systems are available to notify people in an emergency, SoCo Alert, Nixle, and IPAWS/WEA. The California OES (Office of Emergency Services) report commissioned by the County Administrator gives an in-depth analysis of the three alert systems.

A large percentage of people were alerted by:

- The strong smell of smoke and visible flames
- Police and Fire sirens, loudspeakers and knocking on doors
- Neighbors knocking on doors and using car horns and megaphones

Emergency managers praise the community involvement and neighborhood awareness since they were critical in providing notification and helping to get people out of danger.

This investigation provides us with an opportunity to recommend improvements in emergency response to deal with the next big emergency, which most planners expect will be an earthquake. The larger issues involve: (1) communications in almost all aspects of the response, (2) the outdated system of mutual aid, (3) a challenging County emergency management structure, and (4) the lack of strategic oversight by an emergency response entity or individual.

GLOSSARY

<i>CAD</i>	<i>Computer Aided Dispatch</i>
------------	--------------------------------

<i>CAL FIRE</i>	<i>California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection</i>
<i>Cal OES</i>	<i>California Office of Emergency Services</i>
<i>EOC</i>	<i>Emergency Operations Center</i>
<i>IPAWS</i>	<i>Integrated Public Alert and Warning System</i>
<i>NIXLE</i>	<i>Subscription Emergency Notification Service</i>
<i>REDCOM</i>	<i>Redwood Empire Dispatch Communications Authority</i>
<i>SEMS</i>	<i>Standardized Emergency Management System</i>
<i>SOCO Alert</i>	<i>Sonoma County Emergency Notification (aka Reverse 911)</i>
<i>WEA</i>	<i>Wireless Emergency Alerts</i>

BACKGROUND

The 2004-2005 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury issued a report, “A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN”, which examined the state of emergency preparedness one decade after the adoption of Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS). The report predicted disaster under the then-existing conditions. Some comments from that report:

“The grand jury found widespread inconsistent approaches to emergency and disaster planning. Some county employees embraced the process of planning with enthusiasm, while others, typically senior management and elected officials, were non-enthusiastic, relying instead on ‘people will know what to do.’ “

“There are no consistent plans to inform the public ahead of time of what information will be available at the time of a disaster, nor is there a consistent plan to make use of media, or the City Watch system in the event of a disaster. (The City Watch system is a software program that allows for sending informational or alert messages to a given geography of telephone subscribers). “

“The senior management commitment to the various disaster plans, at the Board of Supervisors level, County Administrator, the city council level, the city manager level, and the public safety level, is demonstrably inconsistent and does not bode well should the county experience a major disaster. “

The report and the joint response to the 2005 Civil Grand Jury recommendations are

referenced in the bibliography.

The current Civil Grand Jury sees many parallels between the analyses and predictions of 2005 and the current issues in Sonoma County.

The Civil Grand Jury looked at several aspects of the recent emergency; this report concentrates on the emergency response. A fire disaster of this magnitude exceeded every agency's expectation, made worse by:

- Multiple fires during night and early morning hours
- An abundance of dry vegetation due to rains earlier in the year followed by a dry period
- Dense smoke and flying debris
- Dry, sustained high winds with gusts exceeding 70 miles per hour

METHODOLOGY

The Civil Grand Jury's focus was on the early days of the fire, with the initial background material collected from newspapers, live press releases, and social media. The Civil Grand Jury sought first-hand accounts from first responders and government employees through interviews. In addition, the Civil Grand Jury researched and reviewed official City and County documents.

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed representatives of:

- The Sonoma County Sheriff's Office
- The Sonoma County Emergency Operations Center
- REDCOM
- The Santa Rosa Police Department
- The Santa Rosa Fire Department
- The Santa Rosa Emergency Operations Center
- The City of Sonoma Police Department
- The City of Sonoma Emergency Operations Center
- The Rohnert Park Emergency Operations Center
- The Petaluma Emergency Operations Center
- The Healdsburg Emergency Operations Center
- The Sonoma County Administrator's Office
- The California Fire Chiefs Association

The Civil Grand Jury reviewed:

- REDCOM call log CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) Report of October 8, 2017, 1900 hours to October 9, 2017, 1900 hours.
- Santa Rosa Police Department Event Log of October 8, 2017, 1900 hours to October 9, 2017, 1900 hours.
- REDCOM Standard Operating Procedures Manual
- The City of Sonoma Emergency Operations Plan
- The City of Santa Rosa Emergency Operations Plan
- The Rohnert Park Emergency Plan
- Cal OES Public Alert and Warning Program Assessment for Sonoma County
- 2004/2005 Sonoma Civil Grand Jury Report: A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN!
- Cal OES SEMS Guidelines
- Sonoma County Code of Ordinances Chapter 10 – Civil Defense and Disaster

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury focused its investigation on three areas of government and public concern:

- Fire Response
- Communication
 - Between emergency response levels (City, County, State)
 - Public emergency notification
 - General public information
- Evacuation

The Firestorm

Nuns Fire Precursors

In the area bounded by the Valley of the Moon to the north and the Sonoma Raceway to the south, several fires (Adobe, Norrborn, Patrick, Pressley, and

“It would be a miracle if no emergency personnel were lost tonight.”

Paraphrased from first responders interviewed

Oakmont fires) started during the evening of October 8, the biggest of which struck Glen Ellen and Kenwood. Units from CAL FIRE, the Valley of the Moon, Glen Ellen, and Agua Caliente responded. These fires would unite to become the Nuns fire.

Tubbs Fire County Action

This fire originated in northern Calistoga, in Napa Valley around 10:00 pm, on October 8. First reports were of vegetation fires, quickly followed by structure fires. High winds exceeding 70 miles an hour and dry conditions accelerated the fire into Sonoma County. CAL FIRE strike units were called in but were unable to contain or even slow down the fire. Embercasts are potential in any fire. This fire was aggravated by the high winds that carried the embers miles away rather than the embers dropping to the ground. The fire progressed quickly along Porter Creek and Mark West roads. It branched both north and south. Many structures were lost, but the crucial life-saving actions were largely successful.

The activity shifted to saving lives. Public evacuation notifications were sent by Nixle and SoCoAlert starting around 11:30 pm. The Sonoma County Sheriff's deputies, assisted by some Santa Rosa police units, were fully engaged in evacuation procedures while dodging the oncoming fire.

City of Santa Rosa

The City of Santa Rosa Fire Department was responding to fires all evening on October 8. Around 9:30 pm a two-alarm structure fire near 6th Street kept firefighters busy battling that blaze. Overall activity increased as the wind picked up and many more fires erupted. The Santa Rosa Fire Marshall was on his way to the St. Helena CAL FIRE command center, but was forced to turn back because of the advancing fire on Porter Creek Road. Santa Rosa fire personnel were desperately trying to determine the scope and extent of the fire. The extreme conditions interfered with visibility, access, and communication. Fire and law enforcement activities were in full force in the Mark West area. Emergency personnel raced to evacuate citizens ahead of the unpredictable, quickly advancing flames.

The Santa Rosa Fire Marshall investigated Cross Creek Road. Realizing the danger of the encroaching fire, he called for the evacuation of Skyfarm and Fountaingrove. It is highly probable that this evacuation, called at 1:41 am, saved thousands of lives.

The fire jumped over Mendocino Avenue into the Journey's End trailer park astounding experienced firefighters. The fires crossed over the six lanes of Highway 101 and four lanes of the parallel Cleveland Avenue where it hopped into the Coffey Park area. The provisional fire-fighting command base at Kmart had to be abandoned because of the winds and fire. The command base was moved to Fire Station 3 on Coffey Lane.

As late as 7:00 am on October 9 there were towering flames at Journey's End. A major stand at the north end of Kaiser Permanente Hospital stopped the southward progress of the fire in that location.

Coffey Park

The Coffey Park conflagration was especially frustrating to firefighters since atmospheric conditions held the very dense smoke low to the ground. Because of this, firefighters could neither see the glow of nearby flames nor see the plume of a new outburst. When these conditions finally cleared, they were able to stop the advancing flames.

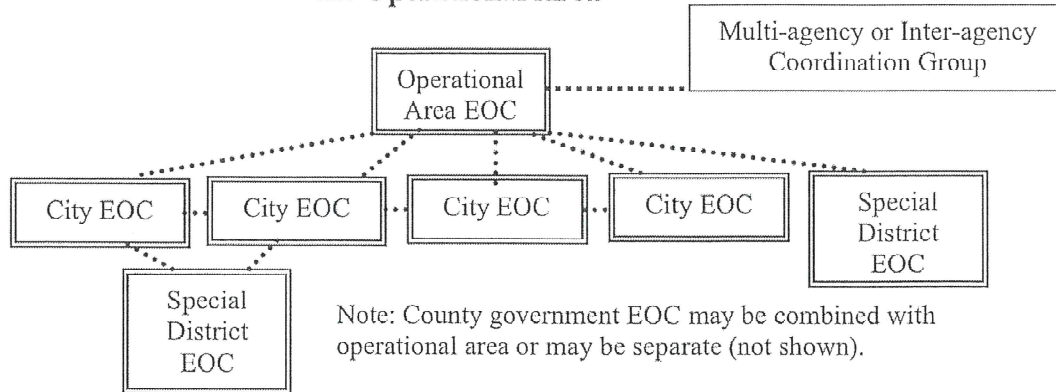
*“We were chilled by the realization that
hundreds to thousands might lose their lives.”*

Paraphrased from first responders interviewed

Sonoma County Emergency Management

- SEMS (Standard Emergency Management System) is the California Office of Emergency Services (OES) framework defining the hierarchical emergency setup under which County systems operate. The County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) reports to State OES and city EOCs report to the County EOC. Formally, city EOCs must communicate with the County EOC only and cannot formally communicate directly with other city EOCs or with the State/CAL FIRE.
- REDCOM is the emergency and fire call center located in the Sheriff's building. 911 calls are answered by the Sheriff's office dispatch center when the call originates from the county areas or by city Police Departments. If the call concerns a fire, that call is manually rerouted to REDCOM for both county and city originated calls. REDCOM and the Sheriff Dispatch are software/hardware compatible. REDCOM has an active project to provide compatibility between REDCOM and CAL FIRE control, located in St. Helena.

Example
Lines of Coordination and Communications between Local Governments and the Operational Area



- Emergency Operation Centers (EOCs) provide a centralized location for emergency management coordination and decision-making during a critical incident, emergency, or disaster. Each jurisdiction creates its own emergency management plan with guidelines to activate an EOC. During the fires, EOCs were activated by: Sonoma County, Santa Rosa, City of Sonoma, Rohnert Park, Petaluma, Healdsburg and Cloverdale, as well as Sonoma State University and Santa Rosa Junior College. Some EOCs have dedicated, permanent space, but many – including Santa Rosa and Petaluma – set up in shared spaces as needed.

Under the direction of each jurisdiction’s emergency management, an EOC provides four functions in response to an emergency:

- Operations, with responsibility for the coordinated tactical response to the emergency.
- Planning, with responsibility for the collection, evaluation, and documentation of information about the emergency and status of resources.
- Logistics, with responsibility for providing facilities, services, personnel, equipment, and materials.
- Administration/Finance, with responsibility for all financial, legal, and cost analysis aspects of the emergency and administrative aspects not handled by other functions.

City Managers usually serve as the EOC Director and department heads lead the four main EOC areas mentioned above. The Sonoma County Code of Ordinances designates the County Administrator as the director of emergency services and that person serves as County EOC Director.