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Grand jury: Fire districts need immediate additional funding

By Matt Miller

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Firefighters fight a burning house from the Lightning Complex Fire along Pleasants Valley Road in Vacaville, Wednesday, Aug. 19, 2020. (Aaron Rosenblatt/Daily Republic file)

FAIRFIELD — The 2020-21 Solano County civil grand jury has found that local fire protection districts are understaffed, under-equipped and underfunded to protect the communities in rural areas and adjacent cities from potential wildfires.

The investigation learned that some districts are using old equipment, volunteer firefighters and have “paltry” funding.

“Fire season is here,” the report states. “Procrastination is not an option. With another drought year upon us, the county needs to find some workable plans and sources of funds immediately.”

The report comes 10 months after the devastating LNU Lightning Complex Fire, which destroyed thousands of acres and 1,491 structures throughout six counties in August 2020. People died, livestock, wildlife and pets perished.

The fire burned 42,000 acres alone in Solano County, and according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the fire destroyed 309 single-family residences and 392 “minor structures” in Solano County. Two men died.

All municipal fire departments in the county responded to the LNU Complex Fire. The Cordelia, Montezuma, Suisun and Vacaville departments found it challenging to provide engine companies and staffing to serve the areas vacated by the fire engines assigned to the wildfire, the report states.

The grand jury concurred with the Solano Local Agency Formation Commission that local fire districts need to consolidate and share their resources. Additional funding is also needed to effectively perform their services and the grand jury found that it needs to be immediate.

Cordelia Fire Protection District is a big point of contention with a fire chief, Dave Carpenter, who is currently working as a volunteer to help balance the budget. Cordelia also has an inadequate facility, according to the report, and a 26-year-old fire truck.

“For the most part I agree with the findings,” Carpenter said. “I’m formulating my thoughts how to respond. It’s getting more difficult to stay afloat. Cities in the county are continuing to grow and there is less funding to the district. Costs have also gotten higher and higher.”

Cordelia and the Vacaville rural district have started the

consolidation effort, agreeing to an operational and service agreement by which Vacaville takes the administrative and operational lead.

The Solano County Board of Supervisors adopted the Solano County LNU Lightning Complex Recovery Strategic Plan in April. The grand jury found that the plan addresses the long-term wildfire programs but not immediate issues this summer. Grant writing and other support resources and funding are needed right now to fill firefighter rosters, the report states.

“Solano County has not accepted responsibility for protecting outlying areas from the yearly fires,” the report states in its final comment. “Without active intervention by the county, addressing fire issues has been glacially and tragically slow.”

The county recently approved a formal request of LAFCO to consolidate Cordelia and Vacaville rural, which would include detaching a large part of the Suisun rural district as well.

In time, the county hopes Suisun will join the newly formed district, and beyond that, perhaps other rural districts, too.



Matt Miller has been a journalist in Solano County for close to 30 years. Prior to coming to the Daily Republic in May of 2021, he was at The Reporter in Vacaville since 1990, serving as a Reporter, Assistant Sports Editor and Managing Editor. He also worked at newspapers in Truckee and Manteca. Contact him at 427-6995 or by email at MMiller@DailyRepublic.Net.