

FIRE PROTECTION STUDY

**League of Women Voters of San Diego County
2010**

The League of Women Voters of San Diego County, also known as the County Inter-League Organization (ILO), is directed by a Board of elected and appointed officers. The ILO is comprised of the members of the four local Leagues in the county, who are represented on the Board by their Presidents. The County League program primarily addresses regional public policy issues.

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FOREWORD

The purpose of this Study is to establish a county-wide Position on fire protection and related issues in order that our future advocacy may address the wide range of concerns involved, including not only fire safety, but also fire service organization, funding, and citizen education. The Committee has assumed that the preservation of our county's diverse ecosystems is an underlying, but equally important, concern.

The Study Committee has met monthly since Fall 2008. A large part of our work has been investigative projects and reports undertaken by individual members, a comparative study of fire protection services in other counties, and interviews with state, county, and local officials.

Determining manageable parameters for our study has been an ongoing concern, and we have elected to focus our report on the so-called "back country" rather than on the more developed and more adequately served urban/suburban areas of the county.

We have included a Glossary of relevant terms and explained the many acronyms of various organizations and commissions. The Resources section contains bibliography and addresses for organizations, reports, and useful websites.

As a point of interest, no other California League has undertaken such a study to date.

INTRODUCTION

The wildfires in the autumns of 1970, and more recently of 2003 and of 2007, have burned a long scar in the consciousness of San Diego County.

	1970 <u>Laguna Fire</u>	2003 <u>Cedar Fire</u>	2007 <u>Fires*</u>
Acres burned	175,000	280,000	368,526
Homes destroyed	382	2,232	1,621
Deaths	8	14	7

* 2007 simultaneous fires in San Diego County were the Harris in the southeast, Witch Creek in the east, and Poomacha in the northeast, along with fires at Marine Base Camp Pendleton, Fallbrook, San Marcos, El Capitan, and Cuyamaca. Acres burned are reported as of October 30, 2007, but the fires were not completely extinguished until mid-November, 2007.

During the 2007 fires, newspapers and other media tracked the roles of the federal, state, and local firefighters as they battled the blazes on the ground and in the air. About half a million residents evacuated to public and private shelters, in the largest civilian evacuation in the nation's history. These fires marked the first widespread use of the "Reverse 911" phone system. Farm animals and pets were rushed to public parks, beaches, and private grounds for safety. Businesses and offices closed so that employees could tend to the emergency as it affected themselves, their families, and friends. Schools were closed. Non-essential public services were suspended. The entire county was involved in one way or another.

These fires brought acute awareness of the matter of organization and coordination of the county's fire-fighting agencies. A number of after-fire studies and reports detailed the firefighting efforts of more than 50 different agencies in the County, their successes and shortcomings. Questions were asked as to why there is not a County-wide fire agency overseeing these efforts since wildfires will continue to occur.

At the League of Women Voters of San Diego County (LWVSDC) Convention in June 2008, the League of Women Voters of East San Diego County (LWVESDC) submitted its Resolution on Regional Fire Protection for consideration by the Convention. The Resolution read:

- (1) Support a county regional fire protection and emergency medical system;
- (2) Support a sustainable source of funding for prevention and suppression of fires;
- (3) Increase cooperation among city and unincorporated fire services as may apply;
- (4) Expand mutual aid fire protection agreements.

The Convention adopted this Resolution. Following the defeat of Proposition A, the proposed San Diego County Fire Services Tax, in November 2008, LWVSDC voted to study the question of the need for a county-wide fire district, as proposed in the LWVESDC Resolution, and to present additional study findings and recommendations to the LWVSDC Convention in May 2010.

The Study Committee reviewed the many issues regarding wildfires, as shown in the following list, some in greater depth than others. It was determined that all were worthy of study, but the direction from the County Convention led the Committee to focus on the core issue of organization and funding of fire districts in the unincorporated county. Thus, this report sets study parameters, identifies certain issues of the study, makes findings regarding these issues, and proposes recommendations for action and advocacy.

TOPICS & ISSUES REVIEWED

Following is the list of the Topics reviewed by the Committee in preparing this report. Some were studied to a greater extent than others. The LWVSDC acknowledges the existence of interrelationships among these topics, and the complexities of many of them. In order to be thorough in the review and analysis, the Committee focused on the items that are the core of many of the issues concerning firefighting in San Diego County: the lack of a County Fire Department and the need for funding for any consolidation of existing fire protection districts.

1. Naturally Caused Fire Conditions in San Diego County Ecosystems
 - Lightning strikes
 - Santa Ana winds and low humidity
 - Geography of mountains and canyons
2. Preventable Causes of Fire
 - Careless use of machinery, tossing cigarettes, untended campfires
 - Deliberate arson
 - Trees and other materials striking nearby utility lines
3. Fire Fighting Organizational Issues
 - Lack of a County Fire Department
 - Jurisdictional cooperation and coordination among fire agencies, including Federal, State, and local fire departments
 - Jurisdictional boundaries of various local fire authorities; funding districts
 - Availability of equipment, adequate equipment reserves, compatibility of equipment (e.g., radio communications); real time updates
 - Authority for the use of ground and/or aerial fire fighting equipment; jurisdictional issues
 - Adequate fire fighting personnel; use of paid staff and volunteers; training issues
 - Acquisition of specialized fire-fighting equipment, including aerial assets
4. Funding Fire Services
 - Lack of dedicated funding sources for a County Fire Department or for the consolidation of fire districts
 - Proposition 13 restrictions placed on reallocation of funds
 - Funding paid fire fighters' and volunteers' training, service time, cost reimbursements, and equipment needs
5. Planning and Land Use Issues
 - County and local zoning and development regulations and their enforcement
 - Local requirements for property maintenance including landscaping, fire-resistant plantings, and defensible space
 - Ordinances supporting the building of fire-safe structures; upgrading older structures

6. Public Services During a Fire

- Public notice for evacuation and/or shelter-in-place; use of Reverse 911
- Transportation including evacuation routes, use of public transit
- Mass sheltering and/or private sheltering (i. e., staying with friends, family)
- Health services, including medical care, food, care for evacuated elderly & children
- Employment issues including shutting businesses, local economic impacts of absent workers caring for family & private property

7. Reconstruction Issues

- Implementation of After-Action Plans by the jurisdictions
- Public and private costs of lost work and revenues
- Impact on government services of lost tax revenues
- Clearing and cleanup of fire-damaged areas
- Rebuilding including insurance claims; availability of reconstruction materials and labor

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Finding: There is a Need for a County Fire Department or an Improved Consolidated Agency

In the County of San Diego, there are more than 60 firefighting districts, departments, and services. These include one federal fire department (US Forest Service) and one state fire agency (CAL FIRE), which have the primary responsibility of fighting wild fires in the rural county. In addition, there are 18 cities and 29 fire protection districts -- comprised of rural fire departments, rural County Service Area fire protection agencies, and five water districts, which also provide fire protection. They are primarily responsible for structure fire fighting and emergency services. There are also six Indian Reservations with their own fire departments, two airports with fire protection services, and several military fire departments on military property. There is no County Fire Department, as exists in three other southern California counties. The County recently formed a County Fire Authority (CSA 135) to unify the administrative support, communications, and training of 15 rural fire agencies (eventually) and approved \$15.5 million a year in funding.

Recommendation:

Consolidate fire protection both regionally and structurally in order to create unified programs which integrate fire services in the unincorporated areas of the County.

2. Finding: There is a Lack of Designated Funding for a County Fire Department or Consolidated Agency

The LAFCO Reports (See Resources) detail the financial restrictions on the County of San Diego to raise taxes or move existing tax funds to a County Fire Department. Under Proposition 13 (1978), a 2/3 vote of the electorate is needed to approve a tax to fund consolidated fire services in the county. Proposition 172, (1993) provided state sales tax funds to local jurisdictions, including counties, with which to fund public safety and fire fighting services. Under Board of Supervisors Policy A-126, all these funds are divided among the Sheriff, District Attorney, and Probation departments of the County. The County funds its CSA 135 and other fire-related expenses from the General Fund. The County has commissioned a Deployment Study, due early summer 2010, which may detail funding sources for consolidating fire protections services.

Recommendation:

Designate dedicated and stable revenue sources to fund necessary fire protection services.

3. Finding: Smaller Cities in the County are Merging Fire Services

Since this study began, three East County cities, La Mesa, Lemon Grove and El Cajon, have voted to consolidate the command of their fire departments. Other cities are discussing merging some or all of their fire services. The San Miguel Fire District has been formed from smaller volunteer fire districts.

Recommendation:

Encourage the merger of fire departments where feasible and support smaller jurisdictions in contracting for fire services.

4. Finding: Rural Fire Protection Services Are Well-Served by the Use of Paid and Volunteer Fire Fighters

Six volunteer fire agencies, two fire protection districts, and seven County Service Agencies in the rural county have agreed to consolidate. In the consolidation, command is exercised by a paid staff supplemented by trained volunteers. About 500 volunteers now serve in rural fire fighting.

Recommendation:

Maintain the present system of both paid and volunteer staffing.

5. Finding: Fire-Safe Building Construction and Property Maintenance in Fire Danger Areas Are of Major Importance

Experience in the 2003 and 2007 firestorms showed that property in rural areas and in cities and suburban developments had a better chance of surviving the fire when the structures were built to fire-safe standards and landscaping was properly maintained as recommended for fire-prone areas.

Recommendation:

Enforce rules and consolidated standards for fire-safe developments.

6. Finding: Continued Development and Promotion of Educational Programs Should Occur

Education of the public as to its own safety during a wildfire begins before the fire breaks out. All fire agencies have educational programs on safety in the home and in disaster preparedness. There also is web-based and print information on a number of governmental sites operated by the County, the cities, and fire departments and districts and other organizations such as the American Red Cross. These programs provide citizens with valuable and useful information.

Recommendation:

Promote citizen/homeowner fire-safe education programs and encourage understanding and protection of the county's unique ecosystems.

7. Finding: Expand Enrollment in the Reverse 911 System

During the 2007 firestorm, half a million persons were ordered to evacuate. This was the first widespread use of the "Reverse 911" system. Yet some persons did not receive the message via the Reverse 911 system because they had only cell or other phones, not land-lines. For their own protection and safety, citizens should be encouraged to register all their phones with the Reverse 911 system.

Recommendation:

Support residents' cell phone registration in the Mass Notification System (Reverse 911).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS/ACRONYMS

Fire Protection Study

Amador Plan	Enables local governments to contract with CDF to keep a CDF facility staffed and ready for response during the non-fire season. The local agency must reimburse CDF for any added costs associated with this service.
ASTREA	Aerial Support To Regional Enforcement Agencies, the air support unit of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department
CAL FIRE	California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
CERT	Community Emergency Response Team (Community program organized under Federal Department of Homeland Security)
CEQA	California Environmental Quality Act
CFA	County Fire Authority
CFD	Community Fire Districts
Consolidated Fire District	The merger of two or more fire districts (usually adjacent to each other), into one district in organization, management, and/or service provision
CSA	County Service Area
C3	Citizens Coordinate for Century3 Organization
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
EOC	Emergency Operations Center, a state and federally recognized command center for government and emergency managers to coordinate interaction and response during regional disasters
FAST	Forest Area Safety Task Force
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
Fire Safe Council	Public and private organizations joined together to mobilize Californians to protect their homes, communities, and environments from wildfire

Fire Warden	A Regional Fire Authority position that will administer the volunteer agencies
FPD	Fire Protection District
ISO	Insurance Service Office
JFO	Joint Field Office
JIC	Joint Information Center, a central control point to coordinate multi-agency efforts to issue timely and accurate information to the public
JPA	Joint Powers Authority
LAFCO	Local Area Formation Commission. The San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission is a state chartered regulatory agency with county-wide jurisdiction responsible for reviewing and approving proposed jurisdictional boundary changes, including annexations and detachments of territory to and/or from cities and special districts, incorporations of new cities, formations of new special districts, and consolidations, mergers, and dissolutions of existing districts.
Macro Report	The title of this Report is “Options for Providing Structural Fire Protection and Emergency Services in Unincorporated San Diego County.” This Report (12/5/2005) was produced by LAFCO after it initiated a reorganization of San Diego fire and emergency agencies in February 2005. It presents seven models for reorganizing the 25 structural fire protection and emergency medical service providers in San Diego County.
Micro Report	The title of this Report is “Micro Report: Reorganization of Structural Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services in Unincorporated San Diego County – Phase 1.” Produced in May 2007 it is the fourth volume of San Diego LAFCO reports, which chronicle the financial, organizational, and service related problems of fire protection and emergency medical services in San Diego County.
Micro Study	Proposed “Part 2” of LAFCO 2/2005 Macro Report. This Report would address specific personnel and financial costs associated with the models proposed in the Macro Report.

Mutual Aid	An agreement made between two or more agencies to assist each other in the manner described in their Agreement
MWD	Municipal Water District
OES	Office of Emergency Services
Regional Fire Authority	Fire authority proposed by LAFCO in November 2008 to oversee fire protection in rural East and North San Diego County. A preliminary step toward creation of a county-wide agency. Includes: Del Luz Heights, Intermountain Fire and Rescue, Ocotillo Wells, Ranchita Fire and Rescue, Shelter Valley and Sunshine Summit.
SANDAG	San Diego Association of Governments
San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum	A professional forum to educate the public about the threat of wildfires and what future changes are necessary to protect the San Diego Region
SDCFA	San Diego County Fire Authority, created in 2008 by the Board of Supervisors to consolidate fire and life safety services in the unincorporated areas of the county. This action was taken after the LAFCO proposal for a Regional Fire Authority.
SRA	State Responsibility Area, primarily privately-owned timberlands, rangelands and watersheds; excludes federal land and land incorporated by cities

RESOURCES

Fire Protection Study

C3 Newsletter	Winter 2009 Living with Wildfire www.c3sandiego.org
Deployment Study	Currently under preparation by San Diego County, due June 2010
Grand Jury Report	2008 San Diego Grand Jury Report “The Fire Next Time” www.sdcounty.ca.gov/grandjury
LAFCO Reports	Various, as cited
NUSIPR Report	National University System Institute for Policy Research Report titled “San Diego County Falls Further Behind – an Update on Fire Protection Services in Southern California and an Analysis of Recommendations Made in Response to 2003 and 2007 Wildfires”, San Diego, September 2009
State Blue Ribbon Task Force Report	Report on the 2007 Firestorm which details specific recommendations to increase permanent state and local emergency services, build responses to meet catastrophic needs, break down bureaucratic barriers between governmental agencies and establish a new commitment to fire-safe construction and land-use planning.
2-1-1	Call Center for help with disaster services

WEBSITES

Fire Protection Study

CAL FIRE: www.fire.ca.gov

California Professional Firefighters: www.cpf.org

Chaparral Institute: www.californiachaparral.org

Fire Safe Council: www.firesafesdcounty.org

Homeowner and Community Fire Information, a website developed by the Farm and Home Advisor Office: www.wildfirezone.org

Information about forest fires, tree removal, fire weather and incident location maps:
www.forestry.about.com

LAFCO Reports online: www.sdlafco.org/mainpages/reportspublications.htm

San Diego County Emergency Homepage: Cell Phone Registry Line:
www.sdcountyemergency.com

San Diego Native Plant Society: www.cnpssd.org

San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum: www.sdfiresafety.org

APPENDIX 1

FIRE PROTECTION AGENCIES IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Designation:

* Rural Fire service providers that opted for consolidation

** Rural fire service providers that opted against consolidation

Agencies that are not marked were not included in the County Consolidation Proposal

Fire Protection Districts -- Rural and Urban

San Marcos (includes the City of San Marcos)

North County

Vista

Rancho Santa Fe

Lower Sweetwater

Bonita-Sunnyside

San Miguel Consolidated

Lakeside

Alpine

San Diego Rural*

Pine Valley*

East County**

Deer Springs**

Valley Center**

Borrego Springs**

Julian-Cuyamaca**

Volunteer Fire Departments -- Rural

De Luz Heights*

Sunshine Summit*

Ranchita Fire-Rescue*

Inter-Mountain Fire-Rescue*

Shelter Valley*

Ocotillo Wells*

County Service Areas -- Rural

Campo*

Boulevard*

Mt. Laguna*

San Pasqual*

Palomar Mountain*

Elfin Forrest**

Pepper Drive**

Municipal Water Districts -- Rural

Rincon del Diablo
Pauma
Yuima**
Mootamai**
Ramona**

City Fire Departments

Oceanside
Vista
Carlsbad
Escondido
Poway
Encinitas
Solana Beach
Del Mar
San Diego
Coronado
Chula Vista
National City
Imperial Beach
Santee
El Cajon
La Mesa
Santee

Military Bases

Camp Pendleton
MCAS Miramar
NAS North Island

Indian Reservations

Barona, Campo, Pala, Rincon, Sycuan, and Viejas

Airport

San Diego International Airport (contracts with City San Diego)
McClellan-Palomar Airport (contracts with Pro-Tec Fire Services)

Federal Fire Facilities:

US Forest Service

State Fire Facilities

California Department of Forestry (CDF) – “Cal Fire”
Warner Springs CDF (listed by LAFCO Micro Report as a Volunteer Department)

Source: San Diego Union-Tribune, June 25, 2008 and Micro Report on Structural Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services to Unincorporated San Diego County, 2007.

APPENDIX 2
COUNTY COMPARISONS

Item	County of			
	San Diego	Orange	S. Bernardino	Los Angeles
County Population (Est. 7-1-08)	3, 161,477	3,126,756	2,060,722	10,347,437
Size of County (square miles)	4,266	798	20,160	4,084
Number of Incorporated Cities	18	34	24	88
Number of Cities with Own Fire Department	18	12	19	30
Percentage of Cities with Own Fire Department	100%	35%	79%	34%
Number of Fire Protection Agencies/Districts	49	13	20	31
Number of Cities in Consolidated County Agency	0	22	5	58
Percentage of Cities in Consolidated County Agency	0%	65%	21%	66%
Property Tax Specific for Fire	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Per Capita Expenditures for Fire Protection, 2008-09	\$153 .75	\$190.44	N/A	\$219.77

N/A: Not Available