

Report Title: Wildfires – Partners in Prevention

Report Date: June 23, 2003

Response by: Pamela J. Nicolai Title: **General Manager**

FINDINGS

- I (we) agree with the findings numbered: _____
- I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: 1, 3, 4, 7
(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed; include an explanation of the reasons therefor.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendations numbered 7 _____ have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered _____ have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.
(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)
- Recommendations numbered _____ require further analysis.
(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.)
- Recommendations numbered 1, 3, 4 _____ will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.
(Attach an explanation.)

Date: August 14, 2003 Signed: _____

Number of pages attached 2

Findings

Finding #1: Most fire agencies neither enforce defensible space codes nor cite private property owners who are in violation of the law.

It is unclear why you are requesting comment on this finding from our agency since we are not a fire suppression organization and do not have authority to enforce defensible space codes. We manage defensible space on District lands aggressively and in close coordination with fire officials. Sites managed include structures on the Watershed, treatment plants, as well as over 200 pump and tanks sites distributed throughout the County. We actively reduce woody fuels and mow grass fuels annually well beyond the legal minimum. We also do not have personal knowledge about the enforcement levels of those agencies which do have such codes.

Finding #3: The Marin County Fire Department, Marin County Open Space District, and Marin Municipal Water District supplement their regular staffs with labor supplied by the Marin Conservation Corps and the state Department of Corrections inmate conservation camp located in the Delta. This additional labor pool provides valuable assistance in vegetation management efforts. But the Delta-based group is limited in its usefulness by the constraints caused by long travel time.

Although it is true we use these agencies as a labor source, our primary source of supplemental labor has come from Marin County Probation Department's Adult Offender Work Program (AOWP) - individuals working for public benefit in lieu of jail terms. We have averaged about 8,000 hours a year in AOWP labor over the last eight years. Since the coming of massive tree mortality associated with Sudden Oak Death beginning around 1997, we have used private tree removal contractors to clear roadways and maintain fuel breaks.

Finding #4: Only a few fire agencies currently use limited controlled prescribed burns to reduce fire fuel loads on a selective basis.

Again, we can only comment on our program. Our vegetation management plan was initiated out of controversy surrounding use of prescribed fire and provides the basis for continued use of burning to both manage natural systems and reduce fire hazards. It is an extremely valuable tool because it is cost effective and it delivers ecological benefits that other fuel reduction methods cannot mimic. We burn 150 to 200 acres a year for fuel reduction, weed control and habitat management.

Finding #7: Some jurisdictions have developed, and have in place, exemplary public education programs and vegetation management practices.

Two important District projects should be recognized for their contribution to making Marin fire safe. The first is the Fire Flow Master Plan. In 1996 voters agreed to pay an annual \$75 parcel fee for the next 15 years to raise \$62 million as part of a \$77 million effort to provide additional water flow for fighting fires in crucial ridge top areas and to help ensure the integrity of our water transmission. More than 100 projects have been identified and prioritized according to need as determined by Marin's fire chiefs.

We are currently in the ninth year of implementing Mt. Tamalpais Area Vegetation Management Plan (VMP). This plan provided the basis for a broad effort of hazard reduction focused on the development perimeter of the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed, including major multi-agency efforts in Mill Valley, Corte Madera, Larkspur, and Kentfield. The VMP has garnered awards from the Association of California Water Agencies and the Environmental Protection Agency for leadership in reducing fire hazards in a manner that protects water quality.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: All local fire agencies should aggressively enforce defensible space codes and cite private landowners who do not comply with the law.

MMWWD does not have the authority to enforce defensible space codes.

Recommendation #3: The Board of Supervisors should lobby for a state Department of Corrections inmate conservation camp to serve Marin and Sonoma Counties.

We agree and we would be happy to support them but the recommendation is for the County to implement.

Recommendation #4: All local fire agencies should review their policies regarding controlled burning and use limited, targeted and carefully controlled burns when appropriate to mitigate fire fuel loads.

Prescribed fire by definition is a careful application of fire to a predetermined area (limited) for specific objectives under controlled environmental conditions. Although burning high hazard fuels like chaparral during the dry season remain difficult, we argue that broad scale vegetation change is occurring throughout Marin directly related to successful fire suppression, and therefore, a significant increase in burning is needed to address the massive changes in fuel loads. Although fire agencies are responsible for conducting prescribed burns, the decision to conduct burning lies with the public land management agency. Our policies support burning. We cannot implement the recommendation for all fire agencies, only our own, and it has been done.

Recommendation#7: All fire departments and special districts, Marin County Open Space District, Marin Municipal Water District and representatives from FireSafe Marin should meet frequently to identify and implement the county's and state's fire prevention and protection best practices. Fire agencies should model their education, enforcement and vegetation management programs around those that are both cost-effective and efficient.

FireSafe Marin is composed of representatives of each of the agencies listed and meets once a month. We agree that fire management programs should be effective and efficient.