

SLEEPY HOLLOW FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

70 Crane Drive
San Anselmo, CA 94960

July 15, 2003

Foreperson
Marin County Grand Jury
3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 303
San Rafael, CA 94903

Re: Wildfires – Partners in Prevention

Dear Foreperson:

This is in response to your request for comments regarding Wildfire Prevention, which was sent to the Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District (SHFPD).

I am responding as the the President of the SHFPD, which is a Special Assessment District authorized to provide fire protection and emergency services for Sleepy Hollow. There is no Sleepy Hollow Fire Department and therefore no Fire Chief. The SHFPD contracts with the Town of San Anselmo for fire protection and emergency services, which are provided by the Ross Valley Fire Department (RVFD). I am also a non-voting Director of the RVFD.

The SHFPD relies on the RVFD to set policy and to establish and enforce standards for wildfire protection in Sleepy Hollow. Your main contact should be the RVFD Fire Chief, Michael Groshong.

Having said the above, I have the following comments on the Grand Jury Report “Wildfires – Partners in Prevention.”

The Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District consist of approximately 880 privately owned homes. The majority of these homes have a minimum lot size of one-third acre. The majority of the home owners utilize fire-safe practices such as defensible space around the homes. This is especially true of the homes on the hillsides or that abut open space. This year, working with the RVFD, the SHFPD spent \$25,000 to cut back trees and vegetation on several of the narrow roads in Sleepy Hollow.

The SHFPD and the RVFD have effective ordinances on the width and slope of driveways to houses and these ordinances are being enforced. The SHFPD has worked to upgrade the network of fire mains and fire hydrants in Sleepy Hollow so that almost all homes have a nearby fire hydrant with adequate water pressure

The Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District contains several large parcels of open space. These include San Domenico School (500 acres), Triple C Ranch, (200 acres), the Sleepy Hollow-Terra Linda Divide Open Space (1200 acres--mostly in Terra Linda), and the Lang Open Space (70 acres). This open space presents a much more serious wild fire hazard. Sudden Oak Death, combined with tall wild grasses has created a significant fuel load.

It is prohibitively expensive to reduce the fuel load on large parcels of open space by mechanical means. The SHFPD spent \$20,000 in 1997 (matched by California funds) to hire the Marin Conservation Corps to cut back brush along a mile or so of the fire road on the Sleepy Hollow-Terra Linda ridge.

Your report does not mention fire-safe roofs. This is a serious omission. I consider wooden roofs a more serious fire hazard than defensible space. Marin County has an ordinance prohibiting wooden shake and shingle roofs on new construction and on major expansions. A decade after the ordinance was passed, Sleepy Hollow still has 100 or so houses with shake or shingle roofs. Most of these roofs are now more than 20 years old, and they are a serious fire hazard to the community. The SHFPD has been “nagging” these homeowners in our annual newsletter. I suggest that it is now time to revise the Marin Ordinance to establish a cutoff date (say January 1, 2008) when all wooden roofs must be replaced.

I would like to see an on-going controlled-burn program on Sleepy Hollow’s hillside open space, but this seems to be almost impossible in the current environment of legal liability, air pollution and “concerned residents.” The RVFD and the Marin County Fire Department conducted two very small controlled burns on San Domenico and on Triple C property in 1998. They were

called “training exercises” to avoid upsetting the “concerned residents.” It is my understanding that both San Domenico and Triple C Ranch still support controlled burns on their lands but nothing has taken place in the last five years. The only effective controlled burns in Sleepy Hollow have been natural wild fires which were allowed to burn out within a controlled perimeter.

I would also like to see more thought given to supporting aerial water bombers. Marin allowed Novato and the anti-aviation forces to remove the Hamilton Field runway as a support base for water bombers. Now, water bombers fighting fires in Marin have to fly to Santa Rosa to refill, limiting their fire-fighting capability.

The SHFPD supports the Grand Jury’s seven recommendations.

Yours truly,

Frank Berto
President, SHFPD

The Honorable Lynn O’Malley Taylor
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P.O. Box 4988
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cc Tom Finn, SHFPD.
George Szabo, SHFPD