

Grand jury says county still ill-prepared for crisis



ERIK CASTRO / FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT, 2020



Homes and cars destroyed by the Glass Fire along Sunnyside Road in Deer Park Friday, Oct. 2, 2020. Sonoma County is ill-prepared for emergency evacuations in the event of another disaster, the county's civil grand jury has concluded in a new report. (Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat file)



Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat, 2019



Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat



Flooding in Guerneville Thursday, Feb. 28, 2019. Sonoma County is ill-prepared for emergency evacuations in the event of another disaster, the county's civil grand jury has concluded in a new report. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat file)



Ryan Lance, front, and Anthony Nash of the Russian River Fire Protection District swift water rescue team Wednesday, Feb. 27, 2019, rescue residents of Sycamore Court Apartment in lower Guerneville. Sonoma County is ill-prepared for emergency evacuations in the event of another disaster, the county's civil grand jury has concluded in a new report. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat file)



Jeff DuVall, director of Sonoma County's Department of Emergency Management.



Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management, law enforcement, firefighters and volunteers gather for a meeting prior to an evacuation drill in Boyes Hot Springs Saturday, May 3, 2025. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat file)



Supervisor Lynda Hopkins speaks during a Sonoma County Board of Supervisors meeting in Santa Rosa Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2025. (Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat file)



Supervisor Rebecca Hermosillo attends a Sonoma County Board of Supervisors meeting in Santa Rosa Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2025. (Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat file)



Westside Avenue resident Brian Andriola, center, voices his concerns to Johannes Hoevertsz, right, Sonoma County's director of public infrastructure, about a landslide affecting his street and neighborhood during a flood recovery community meeting at El Molino High School in Forestville Sunday, March 3, 2019 . (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat file)

BY EMMA MURPHY THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Despite years of work and extensive investments to bolster its disaster planning and response, Sonoma County remains ill-prepared for emergency evacuations in the event of another regional firestorm, flood or other major disaster, the county's civil grand jury has concluded in a new report.

The stinging assessment comes even after the strides the county, local cities and grassroots groups have taken after the 2017 firestorm and subsequent disasters to improve planning for the type of large emergencies that can displace thousands of people at a time.

The tools and protocols now in place, the grand jury found, function only as a foundation for evacuation plans — and those plans, covering much of the region, lack the detailed, proactive steps to ensure they can work, especially along the county's sprawling rural road network, the new report says.

The panel faulted the county for its lack of modern modeling technology to evaluate evacuation routes and plan around known traffic choke points. The county also depends too heavily on cellphone networks and the internet to communicate alerts — an unreliable method for rural residents, according to the 20-page report.

“Without accelerated investment in planning, communications, and road improvements — and full compliance with California's legal standards — the risk of chaotic, life-threatening evacuations remains high,” the report states.

Board of Supervisors Vice Chair Rebecca Hermosillo said she could not comment in detail on the report until the board completes its formal response, but said the grand jury did a “great job” identifying areas for improvement.

She nevertheless pushed back on the assertion that the county's evacuation plans were lacking and the community unsafe.

“We have to remember we've evacuated half of the county's population three times since 2017 and we did that safely,” she said.

The jury determined the county has not kept pace with three state requirements that would help address some of the gaps. Those laws require local governments to drill down on their evacuation planning by mapping neighborhoods with only one exit and entrance, identifying emergency shelters and refuge areas in advance and evaluating evacuation route capacity, safety and viability.

The county's 2030 target to meet those state requirements is too far off, the grand jury said.

Its report comes weeks after local fire officials warned the region is likely to experience a long peak fire season driven by the rapidly drying landscape and projected hot temperatures this summer.

To address planning gaps, the grand jury outlined a series of remedial steps with deadlines for the county to implement starting in February through the end of next year.

The county should acquire modern mapping tools for more detailed evacuation planning, boost the radio network to ensure rural areas receive emergency alerts, identify more emergency shelter locations in advance and determine whether certified and trained county employees can assist with traffic control during majority disasters, the grand jury said.

The recommendations are not mandatory but the report requires responses from the county's public infrastructure and emergency management departments within 60 days. The Board of Supervisors and Sonoma County Sheriff also are required to respond within 90 days.

The report was one of at least six released this month by the all-volunteer grand jury, which is impaneled each year to assess a broad range of local government programs and services. Other reports from the 2024-25 grand jury covered topics including operations at the county's regional airport, the county's permitting department and animal control countywide.

The grand jury decided to investigate the county's evacuation planning after a few members expressed interest, said Karen Rocco, the jury foreperson.

"It is a topic that is constantly on the minds of people in this county," Rob Hunter, one of the jurors, added, referring to the county's history with devastating wildfires.

The 2017 wildfires, which killed 40 people across Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino counties, destroyed more than 6,000 homes and burned close to 400 square miles, revealed the county was not prepared for emergencies on that scale.

A subsequent state appraisal and the county's own assessment of its response were damning and drove an emergency response overhaul that included a newly tasked, independent emergency management agency, major changes in 911 dispatch instructions for wildfires and investment in new warning systems, including Amber Alert-type cellphone warnings and hi-low sirens for public safety responders.

Still, a primary challenge facing the county is the network of roads in unincorporated areas cannot at times support both evacuating traffic and inbound emergency vehicles simultaneously, the grand jury concluded. The county's few main arteries can experience long traffic jams as evacuees are funneled to main junctures.

"Thousands of residents live in remote canyons or along single lane roads, where reaching an exit route during a natural disaster can take hours," the report states. "There are only a few main evacuation routes which can become bottlenecks."

Instead of recommending large road projects requiring significant funding and heavy oversight from state agencies, the jury focused on solutions within the county's control, said Hunter.

Two such solutions included designating shelters and refuges in advance, before emergencies develop, and training qualified county employees to help direct traffic.

When Joan Broughton and her husband had to evacuate their Windsor home during the 2019 Kincade Fire, they didn't know where they were supposed to go and found themselves in a backup on Old Redwood Highway until her husband was able to take back roads to get to a friend's house where they stayed.

"It was more a question of just mass confusion with a good dose of stress," Broughton said. "There wasn't anyone I saw directing traffic."

Broughton, who lives in the 55+ Brooks Creek community, has since begun trying to pull together a group of neighbors who can help the community's residents, many of them elderly, prepare for evacuations.

"They need help and it's hard too because people are very proud of being self sufficient, you couldn't live here if you couldn't get around somehow," Broughton said. "But all bets are off when you have to leave your house in a hurry whether its fires or other kinds of emergencies."

She said she has found it hard to find information that is easy to disseminate. Many of the county's alert systems require the use of cellphones, but Broughton noted many of her neighbors do not regularly use cellphones or computers, making it an impractical system to reach some of the residents most at-risk during fast-moving disasters.

During the Kincade Fire, her neighborhood learned of the evacuation orders issued by the Sheriff's Office from people going up and down the street spreading the word.

For rural residents, cellphone and internet service also is not always reliable. That reality led the jury to recommend the county invest in bolstering the reach of emergency warnings via radio and work with local volunteer groups to help strengthen the local networks of information and resource sharing.

Board Chair Lynda Hopkins, in a text, pointed to the challenge of relying on private companies, like AT&T and Verizon, that control communications networks to provide reliable service in rural communities — something residents and lawmakers have wrestled with for years amid worsening wildfires.

She recalled a past drill for the county's wireless emergency alert system in the Guerneville area. When the alert was sent out to the lower Russian River community, none of the firefighters in the downtown station received it, she said.

"We've put a lot of energy into alternate communication systems like ham radio, but we need to do more," she said. "We've also done test evacuations in a variety of unincorporated communities — like Occidental — and need to continue to do more of this. Every time we practice we learn something new."

Johannes Hoevertsz, the county's public infrastructure director, said one of the challenges is the various departments involved in emergency response often seem to operate in silos and struggle to communicate.

"More collaboration, we all can communicate, it's something I think the grand jury identified that we need to do and they're right," he said.

Still, the county has come a long way since 2017, Hoevertsz said.

Public infrastructure and other departments and agencies have invested in tools to expand the radio network but there are still gaps in coverage.

"It works really good but we need to bolster it, fund it better and incorporate it with the systems that we have," he said.

Echoing the grand jury's findings, Hoevertsz added the county can ease some of the logistics through more advanced planning.

The grand jury's call for earlier identification of evacuation shelters and state-of-the-art mapping of neighborhoods with limited entry and exit points are things the city of Santa Rosa does well, the report noted.

The city, according to the report, has specific evacuation management plans that include "remote traffic light controls, assignment of on-site traffic management personnel, and specific shelter destinations with permanent designation signage."

In contrast, Sonoma County's emergency operations plan "is essentially ad hoc: the plan and practice (according to the entities in charge of emergency management) is to figure it out on the fly, depending on what the emergency is and how it seems likely to progress," the report states.

Andy Cohen, one of the jurors, said the contrast between Santa Rosa and Sonoma County's jumped out to him during the investigation. Santa Rosa, he said, is "really on the ball."

In an email, responding to an interview request, Jeff DuVall director of the county's emergency management department, said the agency was reviewing the report "and looks forward to providing a detailed response within the time period."

"The department and the County of Sonoma is committed to transparency, open government, values and appreciate the work of the Grand Jury," he said.

Sheriff Eddie Engram was unavailable for an interview.

Bean Anderson, a Sonoma Valley resident, has been calling for the county to study how housing development projects will impact traffic during emergencies. He thought the grand jury report overlooked that issue but hopes the findings will push the county to take a closer look.

"The findings here are really interesting because they repeatedly point out the county hasn't invested in any tools," Anderson said. "In effect, they don't actually know what the evacuation problems are."

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