

# EL DORADO COUNTY GRAND JURY 2019-2020

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## WEST SLOPE FIRE PROTECTION UPDATE

CASE 19-06 • JUNE 8, 2020

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Public Release

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**JUNE 15, 2020**

# EL DORADO COUNTY 2019-2020 GRAND JURY

## *WEST SLOPE FIRE PROTECTION UPDATE*

Case 19-06 • June 8, 2020

### **BACKGROUND**

Fire protection on the West Slope of El Dorado County is provided by nine special fire protection districts and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire). A special fire protection district is an independent political entity having a defined geographic boundary, set revenue base and an elected board of directors. The relatively large number of fire protection entities provide an inconsistent level of services that is unique to most rural California counties.

For many years there have been ongoing conversations about methods to improve County fire protection. Stakeholders in these ongoing discussions include El Dorado County Board of Supervisors (BOS), County staff, El Dorado County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), the staffs and boards of directors of the fire districts, Cal Fire and previous Grand Juries.

The 2017-2018 Grand Jury Report, *El Dorado County Fire Protection Consolidation* addressed many of the key components of the problem. In summary the report stated:

*“Proposition 13 significantly reduced revenues for local governments including fire protection districts. Many El Dorado County (EDC) fire protection districts have struggled to survive while continuing to provide service to their districts. Compelling reasons to consolidate fire agencies in El Dorado County exist, from cost savings to operational efficiency.” and “Total or partial consolidation of fire protection agencies will take time.”*

The report explained the funding limitations within which fire districts must operate. The report noted benefits of consolidation include cost savings, increased operational efficiency and firefighter safety along with standardization of training, equipment and practices. The report also noted obstacles to consolidation including a disparity in tax revenue, fear of losing local control and labor union resistance.

The 2018-2019 Grand Jury report, *Moving Forward in County Fire Services Sustainability* continued in the same vein as the 2017-2018 Grand Jury report. The 2018-2019 Grand Jury found varied interest in consolidation by fire districts:

from *“...no interest in any type of consolidation.”*  
to *“...already involved in some type of consolidation or exploring that possibility.”*  
and *“All reported that funding inequities among Districts was the major obstacle to full consolidation.”*

The Grand Jury reported on a series of meetings with LAFCO, El Dorado County Chief Administrative Officer and El Dorado Hills Fire that discussed consolidation and long-term sustainability of County fire services. There was no mention of formal movement toward consolidation in any form.

This Grand Jury report will describe any movement in consolidation and quantify the differences among the nine fire protection districts on the West Slope.

## METHODOLOGY

### **DOCUMENTS REVIEWED**

- 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 Grand Jury reports
- Citigate Associates, LLC, May 13, 2010, Fire and Emergency Service Study for El Dorado LAFCO

### **Interviewed**

- El Dorado County elected officials
- El Dorado County appointed personnel
- West Slope fire protection district board members
- West Slope fire protection district employees
- Representative from the Cal Fire Amador-El Dorado County Unit
- Representative from LAFCO

### **Meetings Attended**

- August 28, 2019, LAFCO with agenda item *Consider and provide direction to staff on LAFCO initiating the consolidation of Garden Valley, Georgetown and Mosquito Fire Protection Districts*
- February 5, 2020 Garden Valley Fire Protection District Special Board of Director meeting held to discuss different operation options

## DISCUSSION

Ambulance service in the County is managed by a Joint Powers Authority, reporting to the County Board of Supervisors. Ambulances are operated by individual fire districts under fixed price contracts. Most service requests to the districts are for medical assistance. On medical calls, a fire engine responds with an ambulance. In many instances, the fire engine arrives at the scene first. The medical capabilities of engine personnel vary widely by responding district, from basic Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) to Paramedic certification. The level of treatment available to a citizen before an ambulance arrives depends on their location in the County.

Individual West Slope fire protection districts vary greatly in population and density of flammable structures. Each district is varied in the services it provides and is unique in the level of staffing and hours of operation. District staffing includes full-time employee firefighters and volunteers. Volunteers are sometimes paid a small stipend when on duty, depending on the district. El Dorado Hills has three paid employees per engine and operates twenty-four hours per day, 7 days a week (24/7). El Dorado County, Diamond Springs and Rescue, all have two paid employees per engine and also operate 24/7. Cameron Park is operated under contract with Cal Fire and is also 24/7 with two paid employees per engine. The remaining, more rural districts, Georgetown, Garden Valley, Mosquito and Pioneer, have minimal employee staffing and rely on volunteers. These rural districts depend on volunteers in an attempt to stay staffed 24/7. However, there are times when there is nobody on duty. It is not considered safe to respond on a call with less than two firefighters. Nationwide standard practice is to have at least three firefighters on scene before entering a burning structure. Volunteers are required to have the same certification as an employee firefighter. The ability to recruit, train and retain volunteers remains a challenge for these districts.

All fire districts participate in an Automatic Aid (Mutual Assistance) program. Using a single 911 dispatch office for the West Slope, response to a call is from the closest available fire station regardless of fire district borders. It is not uncommon for multiple fire districts to respond to a call. Automatic Aid provides better coverage than any single fire district can provide but in more rural areas Automatic Aid can take as much as 30-45 minutes to arrive at an incident. Automatic Aid is a voluntary agreement between the fire districts. Should a fire district find that they are responding to an inordinate number of calls in another district that is unable to provide adequate service to its own district, the responding district may opt out of Automatic Aid with that district, leaving it under-protected. Citizens, especially those in rural and small districts, need to be more aware of their fire district's financial and operational condition before the district reaches a breaking point.

Previous Grand Jury reports detailed the financing of our County's fire districts. The primary source of revenue is a percentage of the property tax collected in the fire district. However, that percentage differs by district. Rural districts with little property tax growth must cover increasing costs another way or reduce service. Individual districts can put ballot measures to the voters for special assessments. The last three ballot measures by El Dorado County, Garden Valley and Lake Valley Fire Protection Districts were defeated. The citizens of these districts are not willing to pay for better fire service. Unfortunately, Automatic Aid may artificially mask the need for additional funding. Long-term fiscal sustainability of current fire protection on the West Slope is highly problematic. Districts also generate revenue by providing strike teams of firefighters and/or equipment to the State or Federal government during major fires. Strike Team revenue is not guaranteed, and it cannot be used in setting an annual budget. Also, the Federal government has changed its procedure to pay districts, requiring districts to pay strike team costs prior to being eligible for reimbursement. That hinders poorer districts from offering strike team service.

The table to the right illustrates money available for fire services by district and per citizen. Population numbers are best current estimates. Revenue amounts are taken from the districts published 2019-2020 budgets and include property taxes, special assessments and basic service fees. The revenue does not include money from ambulance contracts or potential strike team revenue. This revenue amount must support cost of operations as well as reserves for equipment purchases, facility upgrades and emergencies.

District	Revenue (\$)	Population	(\$ Per Person
Cameron Park	2,898,809	21,000	138
Diamond Springs/El Dorado	4,444,359	24,000	185
El Dorado County	12,129,345	71,000	171
El Dorado Hills	19,671,938	47,000	419
Garden Valley	672,749	8,000	84
Georgetown	772,437	3,000	257
Mosquito	356,600	3,500	102
Pioneer	1,111,357	7,000	159
Rescue	1,585,661	5,000	317
Unincorporated West Slope	43,643,255	189,500	230

The operation of nine separate fire districts is inefficient, both financially and operationally. With some limited exceptions, each district has its own training regimen, equipment requirements, administrative costs, supply purchase, insurance policies and salary & benefit schedule. The State has set minimum requirements for training, equipment and hiring standards. However, operations exceeding those standards can vary widely between districts. In interviews with fire district employees and directors there was wide agreement that a single County fire department could function more efficiently financially and operationally.

While there is general acknowledgement that a single fire district is the best option, tremendous obstacles prohibit the County from getting to a single fire district or authority. There have been many recent discussions among fire districts about limited consolidation. The last two consolidations in the County were Coloma/Lotus Fire District consolidating into El Dorado County Fire District, and Latrobe into El Dorado Hills County Water District (the name of the El Dorado Hills Fire Department).

There have been discussions about consolidating the three Divide Fire Districts: Georgetown, Garden Valley and Mosquito. After interviews with all three districts, there is an acknowledgement that a consolidation has merit; however, consolidation is currently not under consideration by all three district boards. After losing their special assessment vote, Garden Valley announced it would be reducing staff from six firefighters to three in fiscal year 2020-2021. On February 5, 2020, the Garden Valley Board of Directors held a special meeting to discuss authorizing exploration of four to five operating alternatives to reducing staff. The board voted to not explore any of the alternatives.

There have been substantive talks about Rescue Fire District consolidating into El Dorado Hills Fire. To complete this consolidation, El Dorado Hills desires a significant annual payment from the County. It appears the County has no interest in providing money for this consolidation. Previously, Cal Fire proposed operating the Rescue department like it does for Cameron Park without requiring additional County funding. That should be a compelling reason to re-explore their proposal.

## **Cal Fire**

Fire protection in California is divided into three areas: Federal, State and Local Responsibility Areas. Cal Fire provides full-service fire protection for State and Local Responsibility Areas in certain counties. Counties where Cal Fire provides most of the service include large counties like San Diego and Riverside, to small counties like Butte and Tehama. Cal Fire has the infrastructure, staffing and expertise to be a major component of a solution to the County's fire district disparities as it has in other California counties.

Cal Fire operates the 911 Emergency Command Center in Camino that dispatches local fire and ambulance responses for the West Slope. In addition, it plays an important part in County fire protection. It operates Cameron Park's fire department under contract with Cameron Park Community Service District. Cal Fire also operates five of its own stations in the County. They have historically been staffed only during fire season unless a fire district pays for year-around coverage. With an extended fire season, they are staffed for much longer periods. Cal Fire funding has increased so that one engine at the Camino station is now year-around. Diamond Springs had paid for a year-around engine at the El Dorado station; however, they no longer have the funds to continue.

Cal Fire has contracted to help fire districts needing interim assistance. For example, they provided an interim fire chief for Georgetown in 2019 while they recruited a new chief. Cal Fire has made proposals to operate Rescue and Lake Valley (Tahoe basin) fire departments. Rescue opted to try to merge with El Dorado Hills. Lake Valley talks are ongoing. Cal Fire also offered several preliminary options to assist Garden Valley. Garden Valley chose to not pursue the discussions.

## **Conclusion**

El Dorado County is suffering from the legacy of many fire districts, locally created at a time when there was no other option. Some of the districts go back more than 100 years. There is strong loyalty to a local home district at the expense of the County as a whole. The citizens of the more rural districts take pride in their independence and isolation from the masses. Living in remote areas comes with the understanding that fire protection service will be only as good as limited revenue can provide. Districts with higher revenue provide a higher level of service and enjoy large financial reserves that insure the level of service and contingencies. Some question the fairness of asking those districts to share their revenues with other districts. Yet, it should be obvious that the level of service now enjoyed in the more rural districts is indirectly subsidized by the wealthier districts through the tenuous Automatic Aid program.

The County Sheriff's Department is a single entity that provides service in every unincorporated part of the County, including remote rural areas along with dense suburban neighborhoods. The consistent high level of service and professionalism we see from the Sheriff's Department is in striking contrast to the many existing fire protection districts, and also a striking example of what a unified County fire protection agency could look like. The men and women firefighters in our County are true professionals that we are proud of. Given a unified County fire agency, the firefighters could receive the support, safety and consistency they deserve.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1. Long term fiscal sustainability of fire protection on the West Slope of the County is highly questionable.
- F2. County citizens on the West Slope experience a wide disparity in fire protection services often masked by Automatic Aid, based on their location and their specific fire district.
- F3. Efforts to improve fire protection on the West Slope of the County have been ongoing for many years with limited success.
- F4. Cal Fire has the infrastructure, staffing and expertise to be a major component of a solution to the County's fire district disparities.
- F5. Improvements in the existing fire protection model for the West Slope requires all fire protection districts to take a holistic view of fire protection and the political will to embrace change.
- F6. Fire protection districts on the West Slope have not displayed the ability to take a holistic view of fire protection or the political will to embrace change, to the detriment of all County citizens.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

- R1. Fire Protection Districts, Cal Fire, BOS and LAFCO should continue discussing ways to improve County fire protection services.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSES**

This Grand Jury report is an account of an investigation or review. It contains findings and recommendations, and names those who should respond to each finding and each recommendation pertaining to matters under the respondent's control.

Please review *How to Respond to an El Dorado County Grand Jury Report*, a separate document included with this report.

### **Responses are requested in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05.**

- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Cameron Park Community Service District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Diamond Springs/El Dorado Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the El Dorado County Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the El Dorado Hills County Water District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Garden Valley Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Georgetown Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Mosquito Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Pioneer Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are required from the Rescue Fire Protection District Board of Directors.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are invited from the Cal Fire Amador El Dorado Unit.
- Responses to all findings and recommendations are invited from the El Dorado County Local Agency Formation Commission.