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## FIRE! FIRE!

### SUMMARY:

The Tulare County Civil Grand Jury has reviewed how Tulare County Fire Department (TCFD) manages its resources and operational procedures. Considering during the past 7 years there has been a huge shift in extraordinary seasonal fires requiring much more staff training and new ways to handle fire suppression. New and updated equipment is also necessary.



### BACKGROUND:

Prior to 2007, County fire protection was provided by CAL Fire via a contract with the County. Due to proposed increases in firehouse staffing as well as significant State negotiated salary increases, the County chose to discontinue a partnership with CAL Fire and establish a county fire department. TCFD was established on July 1, 2007. In September of 2017, TCFD moved its headquarters from its original location in Farmersville to the building it currently occupies at 835 S. Akers St in Visalia. In 2022, the fire dispatch operations center moved from a small trailer in Mooney Grove Park to a state of the art facility at the Akers location. This allowed for the Sheriff's Office and TCFD to combine services at one location, including 911 operations. All County fire stations were originally staffed with one person per shift but as of January 2022, TCFD has increased its staffing at 6 stations to 2 full time personnel partly due to the horrendous fire conditions and growing communities.

### METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

1. Presentation
2. Review of documents
3. Review various websites
4. Site visit

### DISCUSSION:

TCFD receives approximately 15,000 calls for services yearly and covers an area of 4,839 square miles (3,096,960 acres). Some of these calls have a response time of 3 hours and 47 minutes due to the locations and terrain.

TCFD is a 24/7 fire and emergency services provider to the unincorporated areas of Tulare County and several contract cities. The services they provide are:

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- Fire Suppression
- Emergency Medical Services
- Vehicle & Technical Rescue
- Hazardous Materials Mitigation
- Fire Prevention & Inspection including weed abatement working with code enforcement agencies
- Public Education
- Fire Code Enforcement
- Fire Cause & Investigation
- Other Life Safety Services

TCFD cites challenges they face every year are an increase in volume and the complexity of the fires, forest management versus suppression, need of upgraded facilities, recruitment of both fulltime and partime personnel, unfunded mandates and title 14 regulations. Due to the strenuous hiring process, only one half of applicants will be hired.

TCFD functions on an annual budget of 30 million dollars and receive calls for help or fire suppression daily utilizing the following:

- 140 Full Time Personnel
- 80 Extra Help Volunteer Fire Personnel including 16 Fuel Crews (which are seasonal and have a constant turnover)
- 27 Fire Stations (23 valley, 4 mountain)
- 56 equipment pieces comprising of 26 engines (at the cost of 1.5 million dollars each), 4 reserve engines, 12 patrols, 6 water tenders, 2 trucks, 2 OES (Office of Emergency Services) engines, 2 light and air's and 2 water rescues. In addition, there are support vehicles (SUV's, sedans, etc.) which are utilized by Fire Department command and support staff.

Major incidents that have occurred since 2018 include the following and should be noted no County personnel were lost, but multiple structures were lost in fires.

- 2018 Camp Fire-153,336 acres burned
- 2018 Mendocino Complex Fire-459,123 acres burned
- 2019 Kincade Fire-77,758 acres burned
- 2020 Porterville Library Fire
- 2020 SQF Complex-175,000 acres burned, 232 structures destroyed
- 2021 French Fire -26,533 acres burned

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- 2021 KNP Complex -88,307 acres burned
- 2022 There were 21 major incidents with over \$300,000 in losses with 452 acres of vegetation burned  
There were communications issues in past years with low numbers of radio channels/bands but now those have increased significantly making communications easier and quicker with other public safety agencies.

TCFD works in partnership with other County agencies including Resource Management Agency, Health and Human Services, Office of Emergency Services and Tulare County Sheriff's Office. They also have cooperative agreements with local fire agencies.

TCFD also has outside contracts with 3-4 crews of "tree fallers" to clear County hills and mountain roadways. There are approximately 30 million dead trees in Tulare County with 40,000 trees cleared in the last five years. A few of these trees were milled but unfortunately most are too badly diseased or scorched and must be chipped and spread over the landscape.

There are currently 11 fire apparatus on order, and these will arrive incrementally in 2023. They consist of 2 trucks, 6 engines and 3 Tender Engines. These will replace apparatus that are greater than 20+ years old.

## **FINDINGS:**

- F1. There is an increased volume and complexity of the calls for service in Tulare County.
- F2. The last 5 years have been extremely challenging with the increase of fire spread, Covid 19 slowing staff training and the need to add outside tree crews to get a handle on dead or diseased trees.
- F3. The new facility in 2022 helped with room and brought in state of the art equipment for much quicker response times.
- F4. TCFD has spent their budget appropriately to continue operating safely and economically to protect Tulare County communities.
- F5. TCFD needs to continue recruiting efforts to find and hire qualified individuals.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- R1. Continue to work with local fire agencies through cooperative agreements.
- R2. Continue recruiting efforts.

## **REQUESTS FOR RESPONSE:**

1. Tulare County Fire Department Findings F1- F5 Recommendations R1-R2



*Grand Jury reports are based on documentary evidence and the testimony of sworn or admonished witnesses, not on conjecture or opinion. However, the Grand Jury is precluded by law from disclosing such evidence except upon specific approval of the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court, or another judge appointed by the Presiding Judge (Penal Code Section 911, 924.1 (a) and 929). Similarly, the Grand Jury is precluded by law from disclosing the identity of witnesses except upon an order of the court for narrowly defined purposes (Penal Code Section 924.2 and 929).*

## IS YOUR FOOD SAFE?

### SUMMARY:

The Tulare County Civil Grand Jury decided to see how well Tulare County Environmental Health (TCEH) is protecting the general health of the public, using mandated inspections of food facilities.

### BACKGROUND:

There are over 2,300 food facilities in Tulare County covering 7 geographic areas. Over 3,000 inspections are conducted annually. The facilities are divided between permanent and mobile food facilities. Permanent food facilities are inspected 1-3 times annually based on the level of risk in that facility. Risk 1: Low risk, 1 inspection per year. Risk 2: Medium risk, 2 inspections per year. Risk 3: High risk, 3 inspections per year. Mobile food facilities receive 1 routine annual inspection at the office. They also undergo unannounced field inspections and are inspected at community events. The retail food oversight program is 1 of 19 TCEH programs.

### METHOD OF INVESTIGATION:

1. Received presentation of the current oversight program
2. Reviewed local media reports on inspections
3. Reviewed specific documents

### DISCUSSION:



Retail food program oversight includes restaurants, retail stores, bars, schools, bakeries, temporary food facilities, mobile facilities, organized camps and detention facilities. Mobile facilities are defined as any vehicle used in conjunction with a commissary or other permanent food facility where food is sold. The TCEH food oversight program primary function is to address safety issues that pose a threat to the health, safety and well-being of residents and visitors. The food oversight program division is responsible for notifying vendors of code violations.

A food handler card is required by California food safety laws. It is designed to ensure that commissary chefs, short order cooks, food handlers and other kitchen staff receive training in the fundamentals

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of food safety and are equipped with knowledge of modern food safety practices to reduce the potential for foodborne illnesses or food contamination.

TCEH inspects 445 Risk 1 facilities with 445 annual inspections, 1,263 Risk 2 facilities with 2,526 annual inspections and 176 Risk 3 facilities with 528 inspections annually.

Permanent food facilities are inspected in four areas:

1. Employee health and hygiene (hair, nails, clothing, handwashing, salmonella, hepatitis A and norovirus).
2. Food temperatures (cooling, reheating and hot and cold holding).
3. Approved food source (growers, distributors, processing facilities and restaurants).
4. Sanitary facility conditions (vermin free, equipment and food preparation surfaces clean and sanitized).

In addition to the basic requirements for a permanent food facility, mobile food inspections also include checks for structure/equipment adequate for menu, housing insignia, fresh/wastewater tanks, and approved commissary, access to toilet facilities, emergency exits and compression units. Any inspection with vermin or no running water will have an immediate closure.

In 2010, the Excellence in Food Safety Awards Program was started. It recognizes restaurants that have consistent safe food-handling practices that achieve a score of 95 percent or above on three consecutive routine inspections. In 2019 awards were distributed to 447 restaurants. The program was put on hold in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local news media frequently publishes the results of food inspections.

## **FINDINGS:**

- F1: The TCEH through its programs is protecting the health of the County's citizens.
- F2: The Excellence in Food Safety Program has been a value to the community.
- F3: Media reports brings public attention to food issues in the County.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

- R1. Continue to protect the health of our citizens.
- R2. Continue the Excellence in Food Safety Program.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSE:**

Tulare County Health & Human Services Agency: Findings F1-F3 Recommendation R1-R2



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