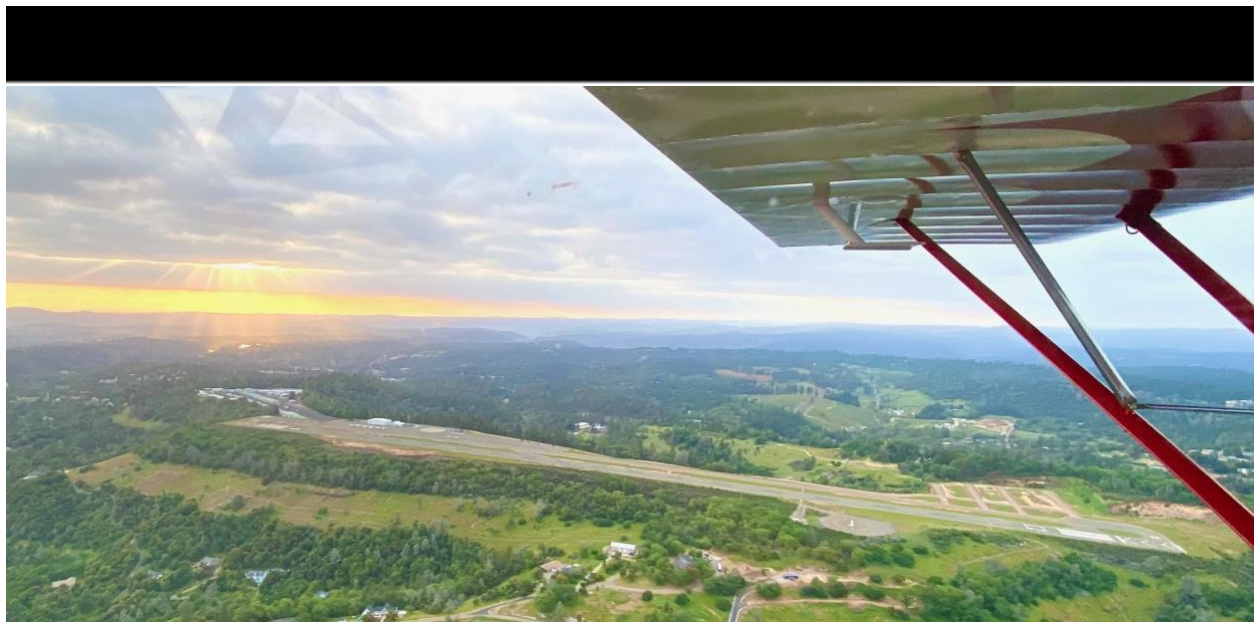


Civil Grand Jury 2025-2026



# El Dorado County Owned Airports Navigating Change



Placerville Airport, El Dorado County – Audry Brand

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## SUMMARY

More than five years have passed since the Civil Grand Jury issued recommendations in 2020 for the operations of County owned airports. Progress was minimal until 2024, when the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors (Board) moved the Airports Division from the Planning and Building Department to the Chief Administrative Office (CAO).

The Grand Jury acknowledges the County's initiative to update policies and procedures related to County owned airports. While this undertaking is praiseworthy, concerns remain regarding the openness and effectiveness of its implementation.

## BACKGROUND

The County of El Dorado owns and operates the Placerville and Georgetown Airports (Airports). Both Airports are located within one of California's highest fire hazard severity zones and play a vital role during wildfire emergencies.



The Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) reported on County airports over the years covering a range of topics from historical preservation to general safety. On June 15, 2020, the Grand Jury released a report entitled County Airports ([Civil Grand Jury Case 19-07](#)) addressing operational management and suggested improvements.

It has been more than five years since the Grand Jury shared its ideas with the County. Progress was minimal until 2024, when the Board moved the Airports Division from the Planning and Building Department to the CAO. Upon reviewing the operation and management of the Airports following the CAO's reassumption of responsibility for the Airports Division, the Grand Jury identified both ongoing challenges and emerging opportunities.

## METHODOLOGY

### Documents Reviewed

2019-20 Grand Jury Report: Airports

2022-23 Grand Jury Report: Building Projects

2023-24 Grand Jury Report: Georgetown Airport

Airport Ground Leases

El Dorado County Policy Number F-10 "County-Owned Airports – Regulations, Security, and Leases"

Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes and Videos as indicated in text

## Interviewed

County employees

Aircraft owners/lease holders/airport users

Aviation business owners/lease holders

## DISCUSSION

### El Dorado County Airports Division Updates

The County Airports Division was managed by the Transportation Department, then the CAO, later the Planning and Building Department, and currently is overseen by the CAO.

The Grand Jury investigated recent changes to the Airports Division after its operations returned to the CAO as approved by the Board in 2024. (Legistar file [23-2157](#)).

Following the transfer, CAO staff promptly initiated updates to airport operations by revising existing ordinances and policies. Standards and procedures for airport users' ground leases (Leases) were also updated to reflect changes to policy.

On June 25, 2024, the Board appointed an Ad Hoc Committee on Airports, comprised of District III and District IV supervisors, representing Placerville and Georgetown. The committee worked with CAO staff to study airport issues: including operations, ordinance and policies, the Airports Advisory Committee, Airports Capital Improvements, Economic Development Studies, and funding strategies (Legistar file [24-1090](#)).

According to the staff report on July 16, 2024, after their initial meeting, the Ad Hoc Committee decided that a thorough review of the Airports program and the Airports Advisory Committee's role was needed. They recommended pausing the Advisory Committee assembly ([Legistar file 24-1281](#)).

The Ad Hoc Committee made decisions without adequate stakeholder input, according to interviews conducted by the Grand Jury. Without representation by the Airports Advisory Committee or a seat on the Ad Hoc Committee, stakeholders said they had limited opportunity to provide valuable feedback. As a result, the Grand Jury received several complaints with concerns ranging from ground lease terms and insurance demands to inadequate representation and public outreach.

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The effort to expedite updates to the Airports program to meet Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requirements and preserve airport grant funding were made with the appearance of limited opportunities for public participation by airport users and interested citizens. This created miscommunication and misunderstandings resulting in the need for additional County resources to complete subsequent revisions to policy and contracts.

## Communication Breakdown

The Board created the Airports Advisory Committee to represent airport users and collaborate with County Airport staff and the Board. The committee addresses issues such as safety, maintenance, tourism, and economic development.

Based on the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Committee, the Board suspended the assembly and responsibilities of the Airports Advisory Committee on July 16, 2024 ([Legistar file 24-1281](#)) because the Ad Hoc Committee saw a risk that Advisory Committee recommendations could be misinterpreted as personal gain instead of benefiting the airports.



The concern for conflict of interest relates to the 2018 Board-approved Airport Advisory Committee [By-Laws](#) (Legistar file [18-1721](#)) that permit the Advisory Committee to review and make recommendations to the Board regarding the annual airport budgets and issues regarding County airport leases, rates, and charges.

Pursuant to the By-Laws, the Advisory Committee is required to collaborate with County staff on proposed leases, rates, and charges. The Airports Advisory Committee gives advice but cannot establish rates or budgets.

The Board completely dissolved the Airports Advisory Committee on December 10, 2024. (Legistar file 24-1891). County staff reported to the Board that they may later recommend a new advisory body for the Airports program. Staff committed to convene annual meetings with airport users, community members, and the District III and District IV Supervisors to facilitate communication and gather feedback.

County staff believe that instituting a quarterly newsletter to Airport lessees and interested members of the public will solicit sufficient feedback as changes in the Airports program come forward. Newsletters, fees, applications, and other resources are posted on the County website for the Airports Division located at [Airports - El Dorado County](#) (<https://www.eldoradocounty.ca.gov/County-Government/County-Departments/Airports>).

The Airports website does not offer an option to request updates for new postings or changes. Other County web pages offer a "subscription" function to the public interested in receiving updates. Subscribers get email alerts about updates to their chosen

webpages. At the time of this writing, no such subscription function is available on the Airports website.

The Grand Jury found that program updates on the website are inadequate to inform the public regarding changes to the Airports program. Without an Airports Advisory Committee, representative body, or a subscription option for website updates, users have no straightforward way to provide feedback or receive program information.

## Airport Staffing

The Airports Division employs one full-time and one temporary part-time staff for management and operations, excluding the administrative duties of the CAO Airports Director. The title of Airports Director is defined in County Ordinance 5212, codified in El Dorado County Ordinance Code section 18.04.030 as “the officer or representative of the County having immediate charge of the airport to include the County Airports Director or any of his or her regularly appointed/designated deputies.” There is no job description for an Airports



Director, nor qualifications required to clarify the position. The Grand Jury was unable to find similar examples of undefined division Directors for comparison. Most smaller divisions of County government are managed by Program Managers, Deputy Directors, or other specialists with defined job descriptions and qualifications. Regardless, the Board appointed the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer overseeing the Airports Division as the Airports Director effective July 1, 2024. (Legistar file [24-1111](#))

On October 28, 2025, following the adoption of County Ordinance 5212 amending El Dorado County Ordinance Code Title 18 – Airports and Board Policy F-10 updated July 29, 2025 (Policy F-10), the Board approved a permanent position for an Airports Operations Officer. According to the Board item (Legistar file [25-1755](#)), “the Airport Operations Officer is an advanced journey-level supervisory class that links daily airport operations with program administration. The job specification assigns responsibility for supervising airport staff; preparing and monitoring operating budgets; administering leases and related records; assisting with Airport Improvement Program grants; verifying conformance with applicable federal and state requirements; and serving as liaison to tenants, pilots, agencies, and community partners.” The staff report to the Board states that the job class provides the Airports program with a single point of supervisory accountability and administrative coordination suited to a small division.

The Board item, approved on the consent calendar without discussion, was silent on how this position will integrate with the Airports Director responsibilities. The cost for the Airport Operations Officer position will result in an estimated annual cost of \$167,303.

## The Rush to Change

While aiming to improve operations, promote sustainability, and set clear airport standards, the County did not seek enough input from the public and airport users. This was evidenced by a series of revisions and updates to ground lease provisions that cost the County additional time and resources.

A series of well-publicized public outreach meetings might have prevented such problems. Significant policy changes by the County affecting stakeholders should prioritize public outreach and feedback. The County has achieved this in the past with other programs. Why it failed to do so with Airports is unknown.



Several citizen complaints to the Grand Jury raised concerns about the County's process and practices for introducing new airport policy and ground lease provisions.

## PUBLIC FEEDBACK

### New Application Fees for Current Hangar Occupants

Multiple interviewees expressed confusion about language in the new Airport policy regarding application fees. In the past, the County did not issue new lease agreements after the original lease expired, leaving tenants on month-to-month tenancy, sometimes for years. Airport users on month-to-month tenancy must now pay the County a \$711 application fee to initiate a new lease; otherwise, they have been advised that their access to the airport and their hangar will be suspended until the lease is finalized.

For instance, a long-term user whose lease expired more than a decade ago and was currently under a month-to-month tenancy was informed that the County needs to ensure all Airport users have updated leases and does not wish to continue a holdover relationship. The user was required to pay the new application fee of \$711 to begin discussions for an updated lease or have their access to the airport suspended. The County delayed discussing a new lease with this long-term tenant yet still required the new application fee.

The Grand Jury found that Board Policy F-10 contains conflicting language regarding application fees. For example, Section II, B.6 requires a new application and application fees for any sale of the hangar that could result in a reassigned or new lease. However, Section II, D requires “any individual or business desiring to enter into a hangar or ground lease for personal or business use, or any commercial operator intending to conduct business at the airport, to complete and submit a County-prescribed application form and pay the application fee.” This provision does not differentiate between existing tenants and prospective users.

Board Policy F-10 contains conflicting language regarding application fees.

Policy F-10 does not provide clear, non-conflicting language to specify how and when application fees are applied.

## Hold Harmless/Indemnification

The ground lease agreement's Hold Harmless and Indemnification section presented to users as of July 2025 requires ground-lease holder to "protect, defend, and hold harmless" the County and its representatives regardless of the degree of fault or negligence by the County.

The County, as the Airports operator, has the responsibility to regulate all activities including maintenance and upkeep of the Airports, types and movement of vehicles used on the Airport, business and commercial activities, the provision of flight information, and the enforcement of federal, state, and county rules and regulations as stated in Policy F-10.

The Grand Jury urges the County to keep an open dialogue with users to specify separate and mutual responsibility for safety. Interviews conducted by the Grand Jury revealed that modifications to this lease section may be considered by the Board for approval based on user feedback.

## Repairs and Upgrades at User Expense

[Policy F-10](#), Section II, B.4 states "the County shall require a Lessee who requests to enter into a ground lease for privately owned hangars that are in existence as of the last update of this Policy that are sold or have no current lease and require a new ground lease, to maintain, repair, or improve the hangar to current standards at the Lessee's expense."



Additionally, Section II, B states "All applicants for Leases at the Airports shall commit to minimum financial investments both at the commencement and during the term of the Lease to ensure that the Airport is developed to its maximum potential."

The proposed ground lease as of July 2025 requires the hangar owner hire a contractor to inspect the condition of the hangar and report "recommended retrofit alternatives for adherence to current development standards and the building and fire codes." This new requirement would result in personal cost of hiring inspectors and retrofitting to meet current code.

Multiple users viewed this as the County's attempt to seize assets after a lease expires or defaults, known as a reversionary policy. According to County staff, that is not the case.

As explained by staff, a reversionary policy allows assets such as hangars to revert from private ownership to County property at the conclusion of a lease, either by expiration or default. The County owned Airports, unlike comparable airports statewide, do not include a reversionary clause in ground lease agreements for current users.

Policy F-10, Section II, B.3.c states “All ground leases for the construction of new hangar or hangar assets shall be for a term of 30 years or an amount negotiated to allow lessee to recoup the investment, pursuant to FAA guidelines. New hangar leases shall contain a clause that at both termination or expiration of the term of that lease the ownership of all site and building improvements shall revert to the Airport except as follows: The Airports Director determines that the Lessee may remain past the expiration of the ground lease under a new lease with a term that is less than five years.” It is not clear in policy if a lessee may extend the lease term. The Policy also lacks clarification on the criteria the Airports Director must follow to allow the lease to extend or terminate.

The ambiguous language in the F-10 Policy makes it difficult for both staff and lessees to determine how to manage the assets. As for new construction, there is no suitable space available for such development.

County staff agree with user concerns that the inspection criteria are ambiguous and have recommended removing or revising language in the next proposed ground lease update, subject to Board approval. The Grand Jury found that the lack of initial communication with users contributed to misunderstanding and a climate of mistrust resulting in additional County resources necessary to make revisions. Early communication about the new lease terms could have prevented confusion between airport staff and users.

## Rate Insecurity

The proposed ground lease includes the initial lease rate but thereafter references the rate schedule in effect at time of annual payment after the first year. A Resolution of the Board establishes the rate schedule. Since rent costs are unknown after the first lease year, both the County and lessees cannot accurately plan budgets. Other rental contracts entered by the County include a cost factor for rent increases based upon an annual percentage increase or standard inflation index. There is no provision for budgetary planning in the ground lease. Including a cost factor would comply with County policy and help generate additional funds annually for planning.



County staff informed the Grand Jury that they are willing to give the Board options regarding annual rent increase rates in the lease. Early communication about the new lease terms would have prevented confusion between airport staff and users.

## Vehicle Insurance Confusion

Board Policy F-10, approved in December 2024, (Legistar file [24-1891](#)) included requirements for unjustified higher coverage on vehicle insurance for lease holders that interviews with airport users described as unrealistic. At that time, Board Policy F-10 required Motor Vehicle Liability Insurance of not less than \$250,000 bodily injury limits per person, \$500,000 bodily injury limits per occurrence, and \$500,000 for damage to the property of other people.



After multiple user complaints to airport staff, the Board revised the Motor Vehicle Liability Insurance requirements in July 2025 to require at least \$100,000 per person for bodily injury, \$300,000 per occurrence, and \$50,000 for property damage. These requirements, according to users, align with commercial insurance carrier's available coverage options.

Early communication about the new lease terms could have prevented confusion between airport staff and users.

## Agreements Conflict with Policy

Board Policy F-10 includes Lease Provisions in Section II, B. County staff recently recommended changes to the lease templates in response to user complaints. The Board approved the revised lease templates on February 10, 2026 (Legistar File [26-0259](#)). The approved lease templates conflict with Policy F-10. Good governance requires that policy guide implementation. Revisions to Policy F-10 should have preceded implementation of revised lease language or have occurred simultaneously.

## POSITIVE IMPACT

### Community Value

Local airports play a significant role in the safety, efficiency, and sustainability of communities. They serve as critical staging areas for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) during regional forest fires, supporting command, control, and coordination of aerial firefighting operations, including spotter aircraft operations.

According to the El Dorado County Transportation Commission, airports are a critical element of the regional transportation network and should be maintained as development pressures grow, and communities expand.

Airports provide year-round support for essential emergency services in addition to wildfire response, including air ambulance and medical evacuation flights, law

enforcement aviation operations conducted by the Sheriff's Office, California Highway Patrol, and Search and Rescue missions.

Airports support private aviation and, based on County-sponsored economic development studies, contribute indirect economic benefits by supporting tourism and related local business activity.

## Worth The Cost?

The County's airport-related costs cover management, planning, development, marketing, and maintenance not funded by federal or state grants. To offset these expenses, the County collects rents, fees, and other charges, to make each airport as financially self-sufficient as possible in accordance with FAA policy.

The Grand Jury Report issued in 2020 identified concern over County funding and provided recommendations to improve County Airports revenue. The Board responded that many of the recommendations in the report would be implemented in the coming year. [Board Response](#) link. The reality is that potential revenue was lost due to delays in implementing program management and operational improvements.



The County owned airports are operating at significant cost to the taxpayer. Staff estimated that the County General Fund contribution for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-2025 would be \$800,000. County funds make up the deficit between Airport revenues and expenses with General Fund contributions. The General Fund represents taxpayer dollars.

According to the staff report to the Board on December 10, 2025, (Legistar file [24-1891](#)) the total existing gap between airport expenditures and operating revenue over the previous years was \$630,000 each year. The recent changes to fees are projected to raise revenue by about \$33,000 annually. The collected fees only partially cover operating costs, regulatory compliance, and future Airport improvements.

The Airports have five main sources of revenue: lease income from land leased to owners who install portable hangars, rent from County owned hangars, rent from aircraft tie down spaces, fuels sales, and property tax on personal property (aircraft and hangars).

Although fuel sales have generated significant income, revenue has declined in recent years due to equipment breakdowns and increased maintenance expenses. Airport capital improvements are funded by FAA grants, county general funds, and limited state support from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). FAA grants come

with strict objectives and operational requirements which mandate the County to keep the airports open for public use.

Airport expansion to increase revenue is not feasible without significant cost for capital improvements. According to the 2020 Grand Jury Report, the east end of Placerville



airport has semi-developed open space with existing concrete taxiways. Developed in 2006, the east end project incorporated FAA safety upgrades. FAA funded 90 percent of the project, and the County funded the remaining 10 percent. To become fully operational, the site requires the availability of utilities like water and electricity that do not currently exist. Utility installation improvements do not qualify for FAA funding.

The Georgetown airport, the smaller of the two County airports, is rural and remote with unique challenges to expansion that would generate additional revenue for self-sustainability.

According to the 2025-26 [Recommended Budget](#) document for Airports, the total General Fund contribution for FY 2025-26 for Placerville Airport is \$550,129, reflecting a decrease of \$50,274 (8.4 percent) when compared to the FY 2024-25 Adopted Budget. In addition, Georgetown Airport has a General Fund contribution of \$116,468, reflecting a decrease of \$71,695 (38.1 percent) when compared to the FY 2024-25 Adopted Budget. The total General Fund contribution for both airports is \$666,597. Staff attribute the decrease specifically to staff cuts.

Although County subsidies for the Airports appear to be stabilizing, operating and administrative costs continue to rise. Currently, there is no established long-term cost recovery plan for the Airports. An Economic Development study was scheduled for completion in July 2024; however, the initial report recommendations were deemed

infeasible by staff, and the report was not completed. Future budget constraints and limited potential for additional revenue may make General Fund contributions to the Airports unsustainable unless there is change.

Could the County privatize the airports? Staff interviews indicate that the County believes selling or privatizing the Airports could result in costly FAA penalties. The Grand Jury found that the FAA Airport Investment Partnership Program (AIPP) allows airports to consider privatization for access to private capital for improvements and development. Under the AIPP program, the FAA may waive repayment of earlier grants or restrictions on sale proceeds if conditions are met, such as keeping the airport open to the public.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The County's Airports provide important community benefits. These valuable assets require diligent management and operations. Although the County's efforts to address outdated policy and sustainability are noteworthy, there is room for significant improvement.

The Grand Jury urges the Board of Supervisors and the community to support County staff initiatives to bring clarity to Airports policy and procedures while actively and openly including the community of airport users and county residents.



## FINDINGS

F1. The County does not follow the guidelines outlined in its Airport Policy Document, Policy F-10, which was updated on July 29, 2025, as evidenced by Board approved changes to the ground lease standards resulting in discrepancies between adopted policy and current lease practices.

F2. The County's Airport Policy Document, Policy F-10, does not define the duties and responsibilities of the Airports Director. The newly approved Airports Operations Officer role has both specific and general duties, which overlap with the Airports Director's responsibilities and creates confusion.

F3. The County's Airport Policy Document, Policy F-10, includes statements that lack specificity and fails to offer clear guidance for staff responsible for its implementation, such as clear criteria for lease extension or termination and new application requirements for existing versus prospective new users. The Policy's subjective language poses challenges for both staff and stakeholders in planning subsequent actions.

F4. El Dorado County failed to sufficiently inform the public about major Airport Ground Lease changes. The Grand Jury found that subsequent outreach prompted by complaints led to ground lease revisions that could have been avoided with earlier engagement.

F5 El Dorado County failed to meaningfully engage with the airport community in the same way it provides engagement for other special interest groups such as the Parks and Recreation Commission, Economic Development Advisory Commission, and Agriculture Commission.

F6. The County's Airports website does not offer a subscription option to request updates for new postings or changes.

F7. Without support from leaseholders, private pilots, and aviation businesses, County Airports would require additional general fund subsidies. These Airports benefit law enforcement, emergency services, and the broader local economy. Airport users should be respected as valuable contributors and need representation.

F8. The County is concerned that turning airports over to private management might lead to expensive FAA penalties. Airports play a vital role in the community, but rising subsidies from the County General Fund may not be sustainable long term and need to be examined.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors update Airport Policy Document, Policy F-10 in accordance with Board approved revisions to lease requirements by December 31, 2026.

R2. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors update Airport Policy Document, Policy F-10 defining the duties, responsibilities, and authority over the

County Airport program (aka Airports Director and/or Airports Operations Officer) and ensure language is clear and based on specific criteria by December 31, 2026.

R3. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct staff to add a subscription function to the County's Airports web page by September 1, 2026, that will notify subscribers when a change or update is posted.

R4. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors establish an aviation advisory group to meet at least biannually with Airport administrators and provide feedback to the Board, when necessary, by December 31, 2026.

R5. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct staff by December 31, 2026, to develop a plan to increase Airport revenue, ensuring public access to events, business expansion, or other recommendations from airport advisors that could reduce the County General Fund contribution to Airport operations.

R6. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct staff to work with the FAA and its Airport Investment Partnership Program to evaluate airport privatization.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

*A Civil Grand Jury report details a single investigation. Each report lists FINDINGS and RECOMMENDATIONS. The organization responsible is notified and is required to respond to the report.*

*The California Penal Code Section 933(c) specifies response times.*

- *PUBLIC AGENCIES. The governing body of any public agency (also referring to a department) must respond within 90 days from the release of the report to the public.*
- *ELECTED OFFICERS OR AGENCY HEADS. All elected officers or heads of agencies/departments must respond within 60 days of the report's release to the public.*
- *FAILURE TO RESPOND. Failure to respond to a Grand Jury report violates California Penal Code Section 933.05 and is subject to further action that may include additional investigation into the subject matter of the report by the Jury.*

*The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.05:*

*From the following governing boards within 90 days:*

- *El Dorado County Board of Supervisors*
  - *All Findings*
  - *All Recommendations*

*For more information refer to How to Respond to an El Dorado County Civil Grand Jury Report available on the El Dorado County Grand Jury webpage at <https://www.eldoradocounty.ca.gov/Public-Safety-Justice/Safety-Justice/Grand-Jury>.*

*Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury do not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.*