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Frightening Realities About Fire in Plumas County

Introduction:

The 2009-2010 Plumas County Grand Jury began its investigation of fire fighting services in Plumas County as a result of statements made by its guest speakers. Even at preliminary stages of the investigation, it became frighteningly apparent that there are many layers to this “onion” and they stink.

The Grand Jury urges all citizens to read this report and contact your government officials to demand they act now.

The issues are multiple and the solutions range from simple to complicated. This Grand Jury chose to report only those issues that show severe and immediate need:

1. There are no fire protection services for one fifth of the homes and parcels in Plumas County. Is your property at risk? See Fire Services Section.
2. Plumas County government leaders have failed to protect the citizens of Plumas County by not taking steps to remedy the lack of fire protection. See Board of Supervisors Section.
3. There are no State fire fighting units in Plumas County. This situation has left us at risk for catastrophic fires. See Fire Services, *CAL FIRE* section.
4. The Board of Supervisors has not acted on the advice of its own Emergency Services Advisory Committee. See Board of Supervisors Section.
5. Plumas County government leaders have been approving land development without adequate fire fighting services and there are no assurances it will stop. See Development Section.

The Grand Jury decided to organize and simplify this rather complex and lengthy report for the general public. We purposely left out many technical terms and inserted commonly known or easily understood names.

Fire Services

Findings and Recommendations:

Finding1: There are no fire protection services for 4,631 (19%) parcels in Plumas County. You can't be guaranteed of any fire fighting response if you live outside of a Fire Protection District (FPD) or Community Services District (CSD). You may be billed for firefighting services if they are rendered (see table below).

The 4,631 number is misleading. Each parcel could have many structures.

Recommendation1a: County government leaders must take immediate action to ensure the safety of its citizens. This Grand Jury does not presume to know exactly what action must be taken. However related Findings and Recommendations are cited below.

Recommendation1b: Every homeowner should contact the nearest fire house and ask very specific questions: will they come to your home to fight a fire and will they charge? Your house may be covered, but are your neighbors'? Their fire can quickly become yours!

Communities outside of Fire Protection Districts

<p><u>Almanor Basin/North County Area</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warner Valley • Canyon Dam • Humbug Valley • Feather River Home site • Willow Creek Home site • Caribou • Seneca 	<p><u>Quincy/Meadow Valley/Mid-County area</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keddie • Butterfly Valley • Bucks Lake • Spring Garden • Little Grass Valley
<p><u>Greenville/Indian Valley/Feather River Canyon</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storrie • Tobin • Belden • Twain • Paxton • Rush Creek 	<p><u>Portola/Graeagle/South County area</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clio • Blairsden • Johnsville • Mohawk Vista • Feather River Inn • Dixie Valley

This list represents whole communities outside of fire districts. It does not include all areas. It is important to contact your local fire department to verify your fire services.

Finding 2: There is no clear way for landowners to ascertain if their property taxes are paying for fire protection services.

Recommendation2: The County Tax Collector must modify the property tax statements to itemize the amount of property taxes that are allocated for fire protection, including the name of the district providing fire fighting service. If none of the property tax goes to support fire protection, the statement should say so.

Background:

Is your house in a fire protection district? The answer is **Maybe Not!**

“Does my home have fire protection?” As the 2009-2010 Grand Jury has discovered, getting the answer to this question is not straightforward. The worst way to find out is by reporting to “911” a fire in your home or your neighbor’s home and then no one shows up to fight the fire. Just as bad, a fire crew may show up, but only to fight your house fire when it starts to burn into the surrounding forest. Alternatively, they may show up, fight the fire and then charge you for it.

The most reliable way to find out if your home or business is located within a fire protection district that has a fire department that will respond to the “911” call and actually fight a fire in your home, is to go to the nearest fire station and ask them. Be aware that fire fighting units of the US Forest Service (USFS), which may be the nearest station, are not authorized by USFS policy to fight fires in structures, but only fires in the wildlands (forests, grasslands). Their job is to protect the forests.

The Grand Jury identified a number of reasons why it is important for homeowners in Plumas County to establish whether their buildings are located on a parcel outside the boundaries of a fire protection district or Community Service District that provides fire protection. If the parcel is outside of fire protection boundaries, the following are likely to be the case:

- No fire suppression
- No inspections for fire code compliance
- No enforcement of state fire codes
- No share of property taxes for fire protection

How many homes in Plumas County are outside of fire protection districts or are without fire protection? The Grand Jury directed this question to the Planning Department three times and received three different answers which we considered misleading. However, from the data provided (three different maps and three separate tables), the Grand Jury derived the following:

Acreage. Plumas County has a total of 1,672,119 acres. The majority (about 70%) of the acreage is US government owned land. US government owned land is well protected by the US Forest Service.

The Grand Jury is concerned about the rest of the land, which is privately owned and is where county residents live. According to the Planning Department, only 11% of privately owned land is outside of a fire protection district. 11% is misleading because the Planning Department takes into consideration all of the land, both federal and non-federal.

When only private land is considered, including all the acres in commercial forest and ranches where very few if any houses are located, approximately 45% of that land appears to be outside of a fire protection district.

When only the private land that is not commercial forest and ranches where most of the homes are located is considered, approximately 20% of that land appears to be outside of a fire protection district.

Population. The 2000 census counted 20,824 residents in Plumas County. Only 950 (5%) of these residents live in areas outside of a fire protection district. However, this counts only full time residents. It does not include the summer population arriving well after the April 1st census was conducted.

Number of Parcels. There are a total of 24,838 parcels in Plumas County for which fire protection is critical. This figure excludes US government land and parcels that are rights of way and could not have homes on them. A significant number of these parcels (4,631 or 19% of the total) are outside of fire protection districts. Since most of the lands are zoned so that they could include more than one building and many contain multiple housing structures, this represents the minimum number of residences that are without fire protection within the county.

This data provided by the Planning Department is misleading.

Here's the bottom line. This year's Grand Jurors were told that the only data available to Planning Department staff was whether or not a parcel had a property tax assessment for improvements. Given the clear understanding that "unit" is the only common denominator for understanding how many homes and/or other-use structures are located outside of districts providing fire protection services, one could conservatively estimate that there is one percent of Plumas County parcels on which are constructed at least two "units". If that number were to increase to 5% within the next five years the resulting increase in "units" constructed outside districts providing fire protection services would increase substantially. It is not unreasonable to envision ten years out to the year 2020 when ten percent or more of the county's parcels would have multiple "units" which in turn would increase that percentage.

The Grand Jury researched the question: is a property's location within or outside of a fire protection district a matter of legally required "disclosure"? The CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® has both prepared and provided Real Estate Brokers statewide with this disclosure document, *Statewide Buyer and Seller Advisory*. The document places full responsibility on the buyer to "contact the local fire department".

According to the Plumas County Planning Department, there are 13 fire protection districts that, along with the city of Portola, operate volunteer fire departments. There are also seven Community Service Districts, which are “authorized to operate fire departments,” but may not actually be required to provide fire protection within their districts. These Community Service Districts may contract for fire services from adjacent volunteer fire protection districts. The level of service may not be the same for homes outside of the fire protection district boundaries as it is for homes located within its boundaries. The table below lists these Fire Protection and Community Service Districts.

Plumas County Fire Districts including CSD/PUD's providing Fire Protection	
Fire Protection Districts	Community Service Districts
1. Beckwourth FPD	1. C-Road CSD
2. Chester PUD	2. Gold Mountain CSD
3. City of Portola FPD	3. Greenhorn CSD
4. Crescent Mills FPD	4. Indian Valley CSD
5. Eastern Plumas FPD	5. Long Valley CSD
6. Graeagle FPD	6. Plumas Eureka CSD
7. Hamilton Branch FPD	7. West Almanor CSD
8. La Porte FPD	
9. Meadow Valley FPD	
10. Peninsula FPD	
11. Prattville-Almanor FPD	
12. Quincy FPD	
13. Sierra Valley FPD	

It is generally understood that there are two critically important elements to successfully protect structures from being destroyed by fire. The first is proximity to and services received from fire protection service providers. The hallmark descriptor is universally understood to be **response time**, or how long will it take emergency fire protection staff and equipment to arrive at an incident. The second essential necessity in the saving of persons’ property from structural fire is an immediately available emergency water supply. Current structural fire fighting vehicles here in Plumas County pump water at a rate of 1,000 gallons per minute and require sustained water flows approximating one hour to save a typical residential structure; that would amount to a sustained water supply of 60,000 gallons per pumper truck.

There was consensus among fire experts providing testimony that Plumas County could support one to five fire emergency services districts. Those fire and emergency service providers are needed to protect all parcels and structures within the County. Clearly, increasing the number of districts is not what the experts have recommended, nor would it be cost effective.

Plumas County Fire Safe Council

Individual **wildland fires** cause the most property destruction of all categories of fire emergencies. All Californians, as well as Plumas County residents, will not soon forget the Oakland Hills Inferno, the Malibu Canyons wildfires, or the very recent Angora Fire located in the South Lake Tahoe Basin that destroyed 309 residential and business structures. Etched in everyone's memories are those vivid televised images of block after block of destroyed buildings. Wildland fires occur in what has been termed a *community-at-risk* (CAR). All Plumas County communities are *communities-at-risk*. Typically homeowners prize these zones as they represent the aesthetically attractive midpoint between the edge of suburbia and most typically beautiful forested areas. Hilly terrain offering premium vistas are frequently a distinct asset of a *community-at-risk*. Unfortunately, extreme fire hazards are commonly ignored by individuals purchasing property in these zones.

Here in Plumas County one voluntary organization, the **Fire Safe Council**, has made tremendous strides by developing a model that mitigates the wildland fire danger inherent to all *community-at-risk* zones.



The Grand Jury found that the use and enforcement of fire codes and standards varies depending on whether they are being applied to a structure (homes, outbuildings, and commercial buildings), to the area immediately surrounding a structure (defensible space, access roads, turnarounds, fuel tanks and emergency water for fighting fires) or to the nearby wildlands (national and private forests as well as grasslands). In Plumas County, responsibility for prevention and mitigation of hazardous fire conditions in forests next to family

residences belongs to the US Forest Service, if the forest is a national forest. If the forest is privately owned, it is the responsibility of the landowner with the possibility of additional assistance from a private, nongovernmental organization, the Plumas County Fire Safe Council.

Thousands of Plumas County residents' homes are located in or next to forests, in what has been termed *communities-at-risk*. The overriding concern facing homeowners located in this environment is the threat of wildland fire. While the State of California has enacted legislation extending the defensible space perimeter requirement around homes from 30 to 100 feet, wildland fires represent an even greater threat than ever before to homeowners in forested areas. This is because most forests have not benefited from naturally occurring, periodic forest fires that consumed naturally occurring fuels. This hazardous situation has been compounded as the number of

homes being built in the forest interface has rapidly increased during the last 10 to 15 years.

During the past several years the Plumas County Fire Safe Council (PCFSC) has developed grant funded projects that have served groups of homeowners, homeowners associations, and other groups in mitigating or reducing the quantity of wildland fire fuels on our forest floors. These projects thin forested areas, remove fire ladder vegetation that frequently leads to devastating crown fires in addition to removing combustible materials that result in healthier, safer and more attractive forested areas. In summary, these projects provide a responsible alternative to periodic wildfires.

The Mission Statement of the PCFSC is: *To reduce the loss of natural and manmade resources caused by wildfire through Firewise community programs and pre-fire activities.* The Council maintains an informative webpage: <plumasfiresafe.org>

Fire Services - CAL FIRE

In round figures, two-thirds of the Plumas County land surface is part of the Plumas and Lassen National Forest, and Lassen Volcanic National Park; the remaining one-third is comprised of privately owned parcels of which a substantial majority are located in what California has designated as this county's *State Responsibility Area (SRA)*. Exceptions to this classification are parcels within *Local Responsibility Areas (LRA)* that include the lands within the City Limits of Portola, a relatively large area surrounding Chester, two small areas of several blocks each located in Quincy, and small areas near the fire houses in Graeagle, Whitehawk, Beckwourth, and Chilcoot. Plumas County's SRA includes numerous approved subdivisions as well as privately owned forest production and agricultural parcels.

The SRA and LRA designations were actually made by *CAL FIRE* on behalf of the State a number of years ago and every five years that agency is required to revisit and evaluate those classifications. Currently that every five-year evaluation is being implemented in this county. *CAL FIRE* is also fiscally responsible for protection from and prevention of wildland fires including forested and agricultural lands as well as structures.

Superficially it would appear to be a "good thing" that a majority of Plumas County residents' homes are located in designated SRA's. Statewide *CAL FIRE* has an outstanding reputation for its emergency fire protection services.

CAL FIRE's presence in Plumas County is extremely limited. *CAL FIRE* does not employ any emergency responders, nor does it house any firefighting equipment within our county. The situation occurred almost 20 years ago in 1991 with the adoption of a "Cooperative Fire Management Agreement" (CFMA) between the US Forest Service and *CAL FIRE*. *CAL FIRE* traded off its Plumas County acreage emergency services responsibilities to the US Forest Service in exchange for acreage located somewhere else. The missions of the Federal and State agencies are quite different. The US Forest Service attempts to protect the national forests, while *CAL FIRE* protects forests and also provides structural fire protection in locales where it has an active presence.

CAL FIRE does maintain a small administrative presence in Quincy; however, the reality of having a SRA designation is essentially meaningless for our county residents.

In designated SRA's, *CAL FIRE* has the fiscal responsibility for provision of the following services:

1. Insure fire safe conditions, based on California State fire codes (4290 and 4291), including road construction, signage, access, vegetation clearance, turnarounds, fuels reduction and defensible space, and water sources, by:
 - Evaluation of plans for building permits and new developments
 - Inspection of construction sites for new and remodeled homes
 - Inspection and enforcement on properties with existing homes
2. Issuance and enforcement of burning permits.
3. Suppression of fires involving residences and other structures.
4. Suppression of fires in wildlands (grasslands and forests).
5. Repair of suppression related activity damage (e.g., spreading of dozer berms, installation of water bars, minor road repairs, minor fence repair, etc.) will be done as an integral part of overhaul/mop-up.
6. Operation of information and education programs including: Red Flag Alerts, press releases regarding fire management and risk, Smokey Bear, and local education.

CAL FIRE does not provide these services in Plumas County.

CAL FIRE has eight fire fighting units, located in other counties, which provide mutual support to the USFS, if needed, for fighting fires in the State Responsibility Areas in Plumas County. There are two in Lassen County (Susanville, Westwood); four in Butte County (Jarbo Gap, Feather Falls, Hart's Mill, Robinson Mill) and two in Yuba County (Dobbins and Loma Rica).

The USFS has seven fire fighting units in Plumas National Forest that fight fires and carry out other *CAL FIRE* responsibilities in State Responsibility Areas in Plumas County: Challenge Work Center, Brush Creek Work Center, Strawberry Guard Station, Greenville Work Center, Gansner Bar, Doyle Fire Station, and Boulder Creek Work Center.

The 2007 Angora fire located in the South Lake Tahoe Basin serves as an example of how ineffective it is for the US Forest Service to exchange responsibilities with *CAL FIRE*. Prior to the incident *CAL FIRE* maintained no trained personnel or firefighting equipment in the South Shore area similar to the current situation here in Plumas County. Similarly, part of the area devastated by the Angora fire had been designated by *CAL FIRE* as a SRA and was a part of that same acre exchange agreement. It took the USFS an hour to arrive at the scene of the incident from the North Shore. Because the USFS was required to provide structural fire protection in the Tahoe Keys community, a function outside of its Mission Statement, the Forest Service billed the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department \$600,000 for its services. Lost in the Angora fire were 242 residences and 67 commercial structures. As a result of this devastation,