

County Fire Heads Down the Wrong Road

The County Board of Supervisors approved a new "Volunteer Firefighter's Handbook" in January and a new "Fire Master Plan for 2012-2015" in March. Considered together, these two documents take County Fire in the wrong direction. Both literally and figuratively, County Fire is heading down the wrong road with the siren blasting.

Improving the Level of Service was the goal when a Bonny Doon Fire District was proposed. The cost-efficient plan to improve service included increasing the number of volunteers beyond the limit set by County Fire and adding a small part-time paid force. Dispatch services were to be provided by the Regional 911 center and training availability was to be improved. Local control of Fire Services by an elected District board was the guarantee of effective service.

An increased Cal Fire presence is the only clear goal of County Fire's new plan. The plan envisions adding additional paid staff on each of five Cal Fire engines county-wide. The initial goal is three paid, with a fourth having been previously termed desirable. Dispatch services remain with Cal Fire and training opportunities are more restricted than before.

Under the new County Fire plan there are NO funds to replace the aging engines, water tenders, and rescue vehicles owned by County Fire and operated by volunteers. All new volunteers must attend a "Fire Academy" – an intensive training program that is offered ONLY on weekends, both Saturday and Sunday, plus one weekday evening –for about 10 weeks. This schedule eliminates many candidates, including those with mid-week availability.

While there are many reasonable and required training requirements, Cal Fire, as the managing contractor to County Fire, saddles volunteers with a number of restrictive work rules. These rules, such as required time-in-grade for advancement, may be economically justifiable under Cal Fire's union labor contract, but provide no benefit in a volunteer environment.

County Fire is reducing overall efficiency by failing to address capital equipment budget issues while focusing on a paid-force operating budget. Discouraging volunteer recruitment and retention can only lead to reduced services with ever increasing costs.

County Fire has now institutionalized its new direction leading toward a full paid fire force at a tremendous, unjustified and unaffordable increase in taxes with no increase in the level of service. This IS the wrong direction.

We invite you to review the new Volunteer Handbook (149 pages) and Master Plan (58 pages) from the Supervisor's agendas. Direct links to these documents are posted on our Facebook page, Friends of Bonny Doon Fire. Join us on Facebook.

We have reviewed these and hundreds of other fire service documents, and we support the formation of an Independent Bonny Doon Fire District.

Russ Mackey & Steve Homan for Friends