



# The Jacob Journal

A Newsletter from Chairwoman Dianne Jacob

October 2004

FIRESTORM 2003

## Winds of Change Making Us Safer from Fire

*More resources, improved communications; Jacob says more to do*

Was it just yesterday, or was it a lifetime ago that the mother of all firestorms barreled through our backcountry and into neighborhoods, robbing us of homes, cherished possessions and loved ones?

For victims who are rebuilding, many living in rental homes or temporary trailers, not a day goes by that they aren't reminded of how the October firestorms changed their lives. I think of the survivor who says he dreams about the photograph he forgot to grab before leaving his home for the last time.

For emergency personnel like firefighters and sheriff's deputies, the astonishing scope of the destruction redefined what professionals once considered a large-scale disaster. With more than 300,000 acres blackened, 2,700 homes destroyed and 16 lives lost, the October fires raised the bar for regional fire preparedness. The region never experienced anything like Firestorm 2003. In the year that's passed, the County has been working to make the region safer.

On September 29, the County hosted an important conference to gauge progress made by local, State and Federal agencies since the fires. The California Department of Forestry,

U.S Forest Service, the County Fire Chiefs Association, the Sheriff's Department, and various County departments reported out to the public on efforts to do better.

The changes since last October are dramatic, including new firefighting helicopters and major upgrades planned for communication equipment.

In fact, I can say, with confidence, that the region is safer from fire than we were on that hellish night last October.

There is still much more to do, and I'm pleased to share with you some of the highlights from the conference.



ONE YEAR LATER: How are we safer?

### Additional Regional Resources

There was no locally owned firefighting helicopter on the scene during the initial hours of the Cedar Fire because the region was wholly dependent on California Department of Forestry's air resources. A Sheriff's duty helicopter carrying a relatively small bucket of water was turned away from the fire, but that craft was no substitute for a permanent firefighting helicopter.

Today, a County-funded firefighting helicopter can take to the skies when flames break out in local forests and canyons. Next spring, another \$1.5 million firefighting helicopter will join it, funded by money collected from local Indian tribes.

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Poway  
Santee

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Agua Caliente  
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Alpine  
Barrett  
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Serving the Indian Reservations of:  
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Mesa Grande  
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Viejas



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The sheriff's department, which serves the backcountry and is intimately familiar with its diverse landscape, will operate both firefighting helicopters. In all, the County nailed down nearly \$5 million to help the region better fight fire from the air.



**Air War:** additional County resources are ready for action.

Thanks to a new partnership between CDF, the Navy and the Marines, military air resources can help battle future fires.

Rebuffed last October because of training issues, military pilots have since received civilian fire zone training. Now, if military resources are available during a fire, our region can access that help.

Aerial resources aren't a magic bullet against fire. They must be used in combination with ground support. In the last year, four fire departments in areas hard hit by the Cedar Fire secured a cash infusion of \$1.7 million for engines thanks to the Viejas Indians. The Intermountain Fire Department brought in more than \$111,000 for a new fire station near Santa Ysabel.

Sheriff's deputies responsible for evacuations in unincorporated areas have been trained to scout fast-moving fire, and deputies are now equipped with protective gear that's been credited with saving a deputy's life during a recent fire in Campo.

Important human resources have been added to the disaster lines too. Hundreds of ordinary citizens around the region have trained to become Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) volunteers. CERT volunteers give critical support to first responders, provide immediate assistance to victims and organize volunteers at a disaster site.

### **Clearer Communications During Disasters**

The internal radio system used by the region's emergency personnel was riddled with busy signals during the October fires. Its East Loop was busy 64,000 times! The County has begun a \$23 million upgrade of the spotty network and equipment installation set to begin this winter. State and Federal agencies still aren't on the system and need to come onboard.

New agreements between the County Office of Emergency Services (OES) and CDF will improve communication between the two agencies during large fires. A CDF representative will be stationed in the County's Emergency Operation Center, the "nerve center" during disasters. OES also will station liaisons at CDF command posts to give OES additional eyes and ears in the field.

### **Focus on Evacuation and Notification**

Many people complained that evacuation orders were slow to reach remote areas during the fires. The County is fine-tuning a telephone alert system that can rapidly dial hundreds of homes to give instructions. The system is no substitute for door-to-door evacuations, but it will give us another tool to warn people about fire. Protocol for the Emergency Alert System, which provides disaster instructions to news outlets, has also been refined.

County disaster officials have finalized a model evacuation plan that should help communities with mass exit planning. The Sheriff's Department has adopted the plan, and communities have been using its framework to formulate their own specialized versions. Some communities have conducted drills.

The removal of livestock from danger zones was challenging because many residents didn't have trailers to usher animals to safety. Soon, a public education campaign, featuring noted personality Joan Embry, will spread the word about trailers.



**Real Time Info:** information disseminated at briefings like this one soon will be available on an emergency website.

The media and the public will find it easier to track changing information during disasters thanks to a new emergency website. Whether its air quality information, shelter locations, or evacuation orders, OES plans to post all relevant disaster information on the web in "real time."

### Rebuilding and Recovery Continues

One of the most important lessons victims learned during the October fires was a rule that fire officials have preached for years. Structures with defensible space— those surrounded by fire resistant landscaping— and properties kept clear of dangerously dry brush are far more likely to survive. When firefighters have to choose between homes with defensible space and homes without, they pick the home they can better protect.



**Green Belt:** homes with defensible space like this one were more likely to survive the October fires.

This year, the County ramped up efforts to educate property owners about defensible space and dry brush by working in partnership with CDF to identify properties in need of upkeep. The goal isn't to cite property owners; the goal is to bring them into voluntary compliance with brush clearing standards and, more importantly, save property.

The Board of Supervisors has made the clearing process easier by giving fire professionals the final say on brush clearance. If a fire chief orders a set distance to be cleared, there won't be second-guessing by the County.

Land charred by the fires is recovering, but two-thirds of the County didn't burn. A massive bark beetle infestation has killed off 80 percent of the pine trees in some areas. Palomar Mountain and areas near Julian are especially problematic.



**Dead Wood:** dead tree removal is going on now in the backcountry. The good news is, the County secured more than \$45 million in funding for dead tree removal. With that funding, our Fire Safety and Fuel Reduction

Program is in full swing. The program works hand-in-hand with the Forest Area Safety Task Force (FAST), which is a multi-agency effort to get rid of dead trees. We are determined to decrease existing fuel loads and ensure that evacuation corridors are accessible. Property owners with concerns about dead trees are encouraged to contact the County at (866) 402-6044.

Building codes have changed since the October fires too. New homes in high-risk fire zones must use tempered glass for skylights, metal rain gutters and boxed in eaves. Even if structures aren't in fire zones, new construction must use fire-resistant roofing like concrete tiles, fire resistant exterior walls, dual glazed windows and other improvements

### Fire Department Consolidation is Crucial

On November 2, unincorporated area voters will have the opportunity to vote on, what I believe, is one of the most important changes that needs to be made if we are to truly learn from the October fires. The fragmented fire districts of the unincorporated area must unite.

The unincorporated area is a jigsaw puzzle of fire agencies with 35 separate fire agencies putting out fires. Response times vary from five minutes in better funded areas to 30 minutes in areas served by all volunteer firefighters. Some agencies are financially flush; others hold bake sales to survive.

The October fires taught us that wildfire doesn't know when it's crossing over from one agency's territory to the next. We've all seen how quickly one community's spot fire can become a regional inferno. It's time to end our haphazard way of fighting fire and move toward a regional fire fighting entity. We are all alone as the only large County in the State without one.

The first step toward that goal is the consolidation of unincorporated area fire departments. Brought together, they will become more efficient. With enhanced funding and training they can cut response times and save property.

Proposition C is one of our greatest defenses against future fires.

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We hope to hear from you soon!

OCT-04

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