

2021/2022 CONTINUITY REPORT

IS IT FIVE MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT IN CAMBRIA? AN UPDATE ON THE RISK OF CATASTROPHIC FIRE

INTRODUCTION

The Grand Jury's initial purpose for this report was to determine the catastrophic fire risk in Cambria. The Cambria Community Services District (CCSD) submitted responses and updates in May and September, 2017. The Grand Jury then submitted its Continuity report in May, 2018, identifying responses to all reports received in 2017. This is a follow-up on activity regarding Cambria fire risks and emergency response.

PURPOSE

This is a summary of the May 26, 2021 response to a follow-up letter to the CCSD's General Manager, dated April 29, 2021, regarding the Grand Jury Report, "Is it Five Minutes to Midnight in Cambria? An Update on the Risk of Catastrophic Fire," published March 28, 2017.

Link to full report named Five_minutes_to_midnight_Cambria.pdf at

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10DcnICrCm_4rToVYL6QDCfAo40_ExjLV

NARRATIVE

All responses given are verbatim.

Link to full response named Cambria_Community_Services_Dist_Updated_Response.pdf at

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1h2_iqeahCv2Ypc1L8Eo-VVMKV4tQLKc5

Recommendation 1. The CCSD should resume a regular plan for fire hydrant testing as soon as possible and no later than the end of the calendar year 2017.

Follow up Questions:

- a. Was maintenance and flow testing completed on all fire hydrants?
- b. Has an adequate schedule been established for fire hydrant maintenance and flow testing and if so, how often are the tests done?

Response: Since responding to your last inquiry, all fire hydrant maintenance and flushing has been turned over to the CCSD Water Department as part of their regular duties. Currently, every one of the 368 hydrants located within the CCSD water system infrastructure has been serviced. Due to water restrictions and concerns over stirring up sedimentation, we have not actively flow tested each hydrant; however, each hydrant has been charged to ensure operational effectiveness. Flow testing and pressure testing is done on a limited basis in select locations to purge the system and verify anticipated operating pressures. Continued testing and regular maintenance are completed by CCSD Water Department staff.

Recommendation 2. The CCSD should amend their fire code to require the removal of dead trees from private property while exploring funding sources to help homeowners in need of financial assistance comply with that requirement.

Follow up Questions:

- a. Has the fire code been amended to include tree removal?
- b. Has a funding source to assist homeowners been located?
- c. Have the Ad-Hoc Fire Committee meetings resumed?

Response: The 2019 California Fire Code, with more restrictive local amendments, was adopted by the CCSD in December of 2019, and ratified by the County of San Luis Obispo Board of Supervisors in February of 2020. An amendment requiring the removal of dead trees was not included due to the potential economic and financial impact to the residents. With recent ecological reports suggesting, and as identified in the initial Grand Jury report, that between 40 to 80 percent of the Monterey Pine Forest in Cambria is dead or dying, it would be financially devastating to require their removal. However, the CCSD is also quite familiar with and sensitive to the very real fire danger that exists. Therefore, in a proactive step the CCSD had expanded the annual Fire Hazard Fuel Reduction Program (FHFPR) to include the removal of standing dead or diseased trees on unimproved properties that pose a safety risk to improved property and/or infrastructure.

The CCSD is aggressively seeking funding opportunities for dead and hazardous tree removal through available grants. We have been working closely with the San Luis Obispo County Fire Safe Council (FSCSLO) on grant applications to the State of California. The FSCSLO was awarded a \$1.8 million Monterey Pine Mortality Grant, and \$199,000 for East Village Tree

Mortality. We have performed a great deal of defensible space work from a FSCSLO sponsored countywide Hazard Fuel Reduction grant in the amount of \$972,606. We were successful in securing an \$88,000 grant from PG&E for dead and hazardous tree removal along Village Lane. We are continuing to pursue grant funding as it becomes available. We are also exploring the possibility of expanding our existing FHFRP and developing a global defensible space ordinance for the community. Ideally, this would apply to unimproved and improved parcels alike, and give us greater latitude and enforcement opportunities in creating a firesafe community.

The Ad-Hoc Fire Committee meetings have not resumed. After the recent election in November 2020, the make-up of the CCSD Board of Directors changed, and new members have not yet been assigned to the Ad-Hoc Fire Committee. Furthermore, due to administrative changes imposed secondary to the Covid-19 pandemic, in person meetings, Board meetings and ad-hoc meetings have moved to an online-only format. As restrictions ease, we are planning to appoint members to the Ad-Hoc Fire Committee and resume regular meetings.

Recommendation 3. The CCSD should request its staff to evaluate and recommend whether any of the following actions should be pursued and funded.

Follow up Questions:

- a. Evacuation signs (no deadline was provided): Have additional evacuation signs along primary roadways been added? Has the siren warning system been extended? Has a separate emergency notification system for Cambria been developed?
- b. Access and parking for emergency vehicles (no deadline was provided): Have existing streets been updated to single-side parking to allow emergency vehicles to pass? Have additional areas for emergency vehicle access and parking been identified?
- c. Hazardous fuel reduction: Has funding continued for hazardous fuel reduction?
- d. Strategic fire plan (no deadline was provided): Has the Fire Department developed a new strategic plan and if so has the plan been formally reviewed or adopted by the CCSD administration and Board of Directors?

- e. Reverse 911: At the time of this report an asserted effort had been made to expand Reverse 911 notifications. Have these efforts been successful in getting more people registered for notifications?

Response: The Cambria CSD Fire Department has partnered with FSCSLO and Cal Poly University to fund a series of evacuation studies specific to Cambria. Professor Cornelius Nuworsoo has developed an evaluation matrix that he uses to determine minimum evacuation criteria. He has completed these studies for many of the subdivisions in our community. We are currently in the process of pursuing grant applications to fund similar studies for the remainder of the community. Additionally, the County Fire Chief's Association has applied for a grant to fund the implementation of Zonehaven, an evacuation management platform that will enable communities to plan, train and execute evacuations expediently. The studies completed by Professor Nuworsoo will be critical to making this venture successful. We have submitted a grant application to the State of California that will fund roadside evacuation signage and emergency messaging. We are pursuing grant funding for the installation of an early siren warning system. We have had site evaluations from industry professionals and have draft plans available that include the necessary infrastructure to reach all of Cambria and San Simeon. We are working with San Luis Obispo County to identify narrow roadways with limited access and improve vegetation clearance in those areas. We have identified a number of existing streets that will need to be improved, expanded or marked with limited parking access to ensure the safe passage of emergency vehicles. This assessment is in progress.

The Cambria CSD Fire Department is continuing to work with FSCSLO to coordinate continued roadside burning and removal of flammable brush alongside Highway 1. Last year we completed an extensive project alongside the east side of Highway 1, from Burton Drive north to Cambria Drive. Additional areas are being considered for further treatments. However, all suggested work includes Cal Trans easements, where we have limited access and controlling agencies are slow to allow future work. In areas adjacent to the easements, we have had great success in partnering with San Luis Obispo County and private landowners in gaining their permission to complete necessary clearing. We are primarily limited by available funding and narrow weather time frames when burning would be considered safe and not endanger the community. Local annual funding continues each year for the continuation of the FHFRRP. The CCSD has developed a strategic plan for the community. The four identified "three-year goals" are specific to improved communication,

financial resiliency, balancing growth and resources, and developing long-term infrastructure. None of the identified goals are specific to bolstering the infrastructure of the Fire Department or fire resiliency within the community. However, many of the Fire Department internal goals can be loosely connected and identified under one of these categories. The strategic plan is due for review within the next few months, and we are planning to push for a high level of clarity and inclusion specific to that of the Fire Department. Communication with the public during an evacuation order is key; the Reverse 911 system is active and working in our community. It is in place and utilized by the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department. Reverse 911 works with a traditional landline phone system, and does not automatically include mobile phones, VPN, or cable telephone systems. However, all residents are encouraged to register their mobile phones with reverse 911. We have implemented NIXLE as an alert system for those with smartphones and used it successfully in recent months. We have done extensive marketing for this within the community and have seen an increase of those registered with both Reverse 911 and NIXLE.

CONCLUSION

The 2021/2022 SLO Grand Jury strongly recommends that the 2022/2023 SLO Grand Jury conduct a new investigation to determine if the Cambria CSD Fire Department and CAL Fire have complied with their own stated standards for ensuring appropriate fire risk mitigation.