

Response to Grand Jury Report Form

Report Title: Sonoma County Emergency Evacuation Plans
Are We Ready for the Next Major Evacuation?

Report Date: June 12, 2025

Response by: Lynda Hopkins Title: Chairperson

Agency/Department Name: Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS:

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: F1, F4

I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: F2, F3, F5, F6

(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed with an explanation of the reasons.)

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

F2. The County EOP is intended to be executed in an ad hoc manner without advance identification of specific evacuation routes or predesignated shelters.

The County wholly disagrees with this finding.

The conclusion reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)'s purpose and function. The EOP is a strategic and operational framework designed to guide the County's preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation efforts. It establishes clear roles, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms, and is fully aligned with NIMS, SEMS, and ICS to ensure interoperability across all government levels.

The EOP does not prescribe static evacuation routes or shelter locations. Instead, the County's Unified Evacuation Team (UET) dynamically coordinates evacuations in real-time in collaboration with law enforcement and operational partners, using situational data and field intelligence. Shelter operations are managed by the Human Services Department (HSD) through pre-identified facilities and real-time assessments, in coordination with DEM, the American Red Cross (ARC), and other stakeholders.

Previous experience of this County and other jurisdictions has shown that the pre-identification of shelter sites and evacuation routes results in the public focusing on those pre-identified sites and routes during a disaster. This may be counterproductive, as in wildfires, evacuation routes may be closed and shelters moved due to the effects of the fire. For this reason, it is important

to rapidly assess the impact of the disaster and communicate with the public regarding unsafe routes and safe sheltering.

Shelter data is housed within GIS systems and activated on a just-in-time basis to reflect incident-specific conditions. Operational support includes care and shelter trailers, supply caches, trained Disaster Service Workers (DSWs), and a robust Functional Assessment Service Team (FAST) program to support individuals with access and functional needs. The County has access to over 100 shelter locations, with Memorandums of Understanding with the County and ARC.

Additionally, the report conflates the roles of the County's General Plan Safety Element and the EOP. While the General Plan Safety Element (managed by Permit Sonoma) guides land use and hazard mitigation policy, the EOP (managed by DEM) governs operational emergency response.

Sonoma County's approach is intentionally flexible, impact-driven, and aligned with best practices in emergency management to ensure readiness, responsiveness, and resilience.

F3. Most of Sonoma County's major evacuation routes are incapable of accommodating predictable evacuation traffic in a timely manner.

The County partially disagrees with this finding.

The County has demonstrated the capacity to evacuate effectively through coordinated planning, early warning, and adaptive traffic management, such as during the 2019 Kincade Fire. The success of mass evacuations is reliant on several factors, including road design, early alert systems, timely public response, and dynamic traffic operations. This challenge is faced by all jurisdictions in California, as no transportation network is designed to fully support large-scale, last-minute evacuations.

Many Sonoma County roads, especially in hilly rural areas, are narrow and winding due to topography and standards during the periods in which they were constructed. These characteristics present inherent limitations when moving large volumes of traffic rapidly during emergencies.

To address network limitations, the Department of Emergency Management collaborates with communities in unincorporated areas for evacuation exercises. These exercises help community members become familiar with the evacuation process, along with several routes out of their neighborhood. Community evacuation exercises have taken place since 2019, with previous communities including Cavedale, Grove Street/Diamond A, Mill Creek, Fitch Mountain, Sea Ranch, Occidental, and Palomino.

F5. The Sonoma County Sheriff's Office is primarily responsible for ensuring public safety during evacuations, but SCSO staffing may require temporary assignment of non-SCSO County employees for concurrent execution of household evacuation

notices and evacuation route traffic management.

F5- The County agrees that the Sheriff's Office is primarily responsible for ensuring public safety during evacuations. However, the County does not agree that temporary assignment of non-SCSO County employees should be used for concurrent execution of household evacuation notices and evacuation route traffic management. Law enforcement personnel are used during evacuations because of the extensive training sworn officers receive, which includes disaster-response training. In addition, during evacuation operations sworn personnel use vehicles equipped with emergency lights, sirens (hi-lo), and radios that allow for emergency communication and coordination with other first responding agencies.

If the Sheriff's Office does not have sufficient staffing for evacuations, existing protocols are already in place to address the issue. The Office utilizes local mutual aid, providing personnel from the following agencies:

Local Law Enforcement Agencies

- Cloverdale Police Department
- Cotati Police Department
- Healdsburg Police Department
- Petaluma Police Department
- Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety
- Santa Rosa Junior College Police Department
- Santa Rosa Police Department
- Sebastopol Police Department

County of Sonoma Agencies with Sworn Personnel:

- Sonoma County Probation
- Sonoma County District Attorney's Office Investigators
- Sonoma County Welfare Fraud Investigators
- Sonoma County Public Defender's Office Investigators

State Law Enforcement Agencies with local field offices:

- California Highway Patrol
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Sonoma State Police Department
- California National Guard

Local Federal Law Enforcement Agencies and Taskforces

- DEA
- FBI
- NCRIC
- Homeland Security
- United States Coast Guard

If local mutual aid is insufficient, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office utilizes out of county mutual aid through its designation under Region II (Alameda County) Law Enforcement Mutual Aid, coordinated by the Cal OES Law Enforcement Division. Cal OES expands the reach of

mutual aid and access nationwide resources such as the National Guard (used during the Tubbs fire) if needed.

F6. Organized community-based communications networks are a proven emergency resource yet remain only partly integrated into county and city emergency operations and communications infrastructures and require additional investment to provide county-wide coverage.

The County partially agrees with this finding.

We recognize that non-traditional communications networks, such as General Mobile Radio Service (GMRS), Radio Amateur Communications Service (RACES) and Auxiliary Communications Service (ACS) are essential complements to conventional communication systems that increase reach and provide redundancy in times of emergency.

The County is actively involved in implementing and expanding these low-cost, high-impact communication platforms, which have already proven their value during events such as the 2023 floods and severe winter storms.

The County's ACS program has over 60 volunteers, along with an amateur radio repeater system and a non-repeater system to communicate locally, regionally, statewide, nationally, and worldwide. ACS has a net control station within the county's Emergency Operations Center with access to all amateur radio frequencies for FCC-licensed technicians, general, and extra-class licenses, along with equipment to support emergency communication to Sacramento to Cal OES's ACS/RACES radio room. The County's ACS program maintains relationships to provide emergency radio support at fire stations, law enforcement stations, hospitals, EMS stations, command posts, emergency shelters, along with other critical locations as needed.

Finally, the County, in collaboration with ACS and our community's GMRS radio operators, developed a concept of operations for integrating ACS operators and GMRS operators in net control and message handling between the two radio systems. Future collaborations between ACS and GMRS are in progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Recommendations numbered: R1, R4 _____ have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered: N/A _____ have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.
(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)
- Recommendations numbered: R3 _____ require(s) further analysis.

(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. ***This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.***)

- Recommendations numbered: R2, R5 _____ will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.
(Attach an explanation.)

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. By December 5, 2026, the Board of Supervisors shall direct Sonoma Public Infrastructure to estimate and report the necessary cost and location of radio repeaters needed to fully implement GMRS repeaters serving the entire County.

Sonoma Public Infrastructure has conducted a preliminary evaluation and estimates that approximately \$750,000 to \$1.5 million would be required to install GMRS radio repeaters capable of providing reliable coverage across the majority, if not all, of Sonoma County.

The most significant challenges to achieving full coverage are found in the West County and certain parts of the East County, where complex terrain and limited line-of-sight reception hinder radio signal propagation. Despite these geographic constraints, the department believes that, with strategic repeater placement, the estimated investment would support a robust and effective countywide GMRS repeater network.

R2. The Board of Supervisors shall direct the Department of Emergency Management to report on the resources required to accelerate Emergency Operations Plan Annex Goals SE2 and SE5 from 2030 to 2027 by February 2, 2026, and shall evaluate this resource requirement for inclusion in the 2027 County budget.

As noted in the proposed response to F2, the report confuses the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) and the Sonoma County General Plan Safety Element. The General Plan Safety Element is not part of the EOP. The Safety Element and the EOP are separate documents, with different functions and legal requirements. The County's EOP does not contain goals SE2 or SE5. The County's updated General Plan Safety Element, adopted by the Board of Supervisors on August 12, does contain Goals SE-2 and SE-5 and also establishes policies and implementation programs intended to help achieve each goal. Several policies and implementation programs under Safety Element Goals SE-2 and SE-5 have a nexus to emergency management but may be overseen by other County departments. For example, DEM has a role in Safety Element Policies SE-2a, -2b, -2i, -2k, and -2n related to alert and warning strategies and evacuation planning. DEM is the lead department for some implementation programs under Safety Element Goal SE-2, including Programs 7, 8, and 9. Similarly, for some implementation programs under Goal SE-5, such as Programs 33 and 35, DEM is the primary department, while responsibility for other programs is assigned to other departments that have authority or programs/services related to the policy.

The report states that the County has not yet complied with requirements of Assembly Bill 747 (2019), and that compliance is not expected until 2030. The County's recently updated General Plan Safety Element satisfies the requirements of AB 747 and related bills, including AB 1409 (2021) and Senate Bill 99 (2019). The Safety Element includes an Evacuation Routes and Locations Assessment (Appendix C to the Safety Element), prepared in compliance with AB 747 and related AB 1409. The assessment evaluates roadway capacity and the time required to evacuate geographically large areas under current and projected future population conditions under three potential scenarios. The Safety Element also includes a Residential Egress Assessment, prepared in compliance with SB 99 that identifies residential developments in hazard areas that lack at least two emergency evacuation routes.

Various Safety Element policies and programs under Goals SE-1 and SE-2 direct the County to continue evacuation preparation and planning efforts, including but not limited to Policies SE-1e, -1g, -2a, -2i, -2j, -2k, -2l, -2m, and -2n, and Programs 2, 6, and 11.

R3. By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors shall fund Department of Emergency Management acquisition of evacuation management modeling and simulation software which will facilitate advance identification of zone-specific evacuation routes and evacuation messaging.

The Department of Emergency Management, in collaboration with the Sheriff's Office and the County Fire Marshal/Warden within Permit Sonoma, will continue to review options and operational needs from the three departments. The review of options and recommendations will be presented for Board review before July 1, 2026.

R4. The Board of Supervisors shall direct the Department of Emergency Management to report on the resources required to identify and include within County Evacuation Maps the location of all predesignated county-operated evacuation shelters by March 2, 2026.

The Department of Emergency Management (DEM), in partnership with the Human Services Department (HSD), the American Red Cross (ARC), and the County Information Systems Department (ISD) maintains a list of over 100 locations to use within the County as an emergency shelter. These locations have been uploaded into ISD's Geographic Information System (GIS).

Once the County's Unified Evacuation Team (UET) or Emergency Operations Center is notified of an evacuation event, a temporary evacuation point (TEP) and shelter are identified away from the threat, and are turned on to be displayed on the County's emergency map (www.SoCoPSA.org). ISD's GIS team uses ArcGIS to power the County's map system and is considered open-source data. As open-source data, apps like Watch Duty and other maps that incorporate open-source data can share live updates of our data points (road closures, shelters, TEPs, and local assistance centers) within their apps and maps.

R5. By July 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors and the Sonoma County Sheriff shall

review Sonoma County evacuation plans to determine whether trained and certified Sonoma County employees (using the authority granted by California Government Code Gov. Code §§3100–3102) should become a resource for emergency traffic control operations.

The County does not believe it is reasonable to train and certify Sonoma County employees (using the authority granted by California Government Code Gov. Code §§3100–3102) to become a resource for emergency traffic control operations. Law enforcement personnel are used for traffic control for emergency road closures and in evacuation zones due to the extensive training that sworn officers receive, including disaster-response specific training.

Evacuated areas present significant public safety risks, including the potential for looting. Additionally, based on prior experience, emergency road closures and evacuation zones can become contentious when residents and/or motorists insist on accessing evacuated properties.

When the Sheriff's Office lacks sufficient staffing for emergency traffic control operations, existing protocols are in place to address the issue. These include local and regional mutual aid, as well as access to national assistance through the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) Law Enforcement Division.

Date: _____ Signed: _____

Number of pages attached: 0 _____

(See attached PC Civil Grand Jury Response Requirements)