

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: Jeffrey DuVall Title: Director

Agency/Department Name: Department of Emergency Management

FINDINGS:

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

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

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

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 Department of Emergency Management (DEM) 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) guide 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 Department of Emergency Management partially disagrees with this finding.

No jurisdiction in California has a transportation network capable of supporting full-scale, last-minute evacuations. The success of mass evacuations is reliant not on road design alone, but on early alert systems, timely public response, and dynamic traffic operations.

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. However, 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.

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.

F4. Most roads critical to emergency evacuation in the unincorporated areas of Sonoma County have no remotely managed capability for controlling traffic flow, and existing traffic controls will not be operational during power failures.

The Department of Emergency Management agrees with this finding.

While some traffic signals exist in certain urbanized areas of the county, none are configured for remote control. Due to the unpredictability of where evacuations may originate or

terminate, pre-installation of traffic flow devices in specific locations may not be practical. Current practice relies on manual controls such as barricades, arrows, cones, and signage that can be deployed once an evacuation area is identified. These are supported by coordination with law enforcement and emergency responders.

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 Department of Emergency Management 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 has been actively involved for more than five years 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: R4_____ have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered: None_____ 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_____ will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.
(Attach an explanation.)

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 our 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. Several policies and implementation programs under Safety Element Goals SE-2 and SE-5 have a nexus to emergency management but are overseen by other County departments. DEM is the lead department for some implementation programs under Safety Element Goal SE-2, including programs under Safety Element Policies SE-2a, -2b, -2i, -2k, and -2n. 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.

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, would need to continue to review options and operational needs from the three departments to formulate a request for proposal (RFP), pending a funding source from the County Board of Supervisors and the Office of the County Executive. The review of options and recommendations will be completed by the end of Q4 CY 25.

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 an open-source data. As an 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.

Date: _____ Signed: _____

Number of pages attached: 0 _____

(See attached PC Civil Grand Jury Response Requirements)