



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 1/27/2026

To: Board of Supervisors, County of Sonoma
Department or Agency Name(s): Emergency Management
Staff Name and Phone Number: Jeffrey DuVall / 707-565-1152
Vote Requirement: Majority
Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Recommended Action:

Adopt a Gold Resolution Honoring Chief Ben Nicholls for his Exemplary Service to the County of Sonoma

Executive Summary:

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Chief Ben Nicholls has served the County of Sonoma and neighboring counties in a variety of roles for 31 years beginning in June of 1994 through his retirement in December 2025. Chief Nicholls has been instrumental in improving fire safety and response in the County as well as being a key leader in wildfire response for the Kincadee, Walbridge, Glass, and Point fires. Chief Nicholls was also instrumental in building bridges between CalFire and the many public safety agencies operating in Sonoma County.

Discussion:

Chief Ben Nicholls served his community for over three decades in a progression of increasingly complex and responsible assignments, beginning his career as a seasonal firefighter at the Occidental Fire Station. Throughout his tenure, Chief Nicholls demonstrated a willingness to serve wherever the Department's needs were greatest. His career encompassed a broad range of disciplines, including wildland fire suppression, municipal fire protection, Emergency Command Center operations, Fire Prevention and Law Enforcement, proactive pre-fire planning, and ultimately oversight of CAL FIRE operations throughout Sonoma County.

It was Chief Nicholls final assignment as the West Division Operations Chief that gave him the most challenges while at the same time the most successes. Starting with the October fires of 2017, the Kincadee Fire in 2019, the LNU Lightning Fires in 2020, and the Point Fire in 2024, Chief Nicholls embraced new ways to fight conflagration fires, but also what could be done proactively to prepare for them.

The Tubbs, Adobe, and Nuns fires burned under the cover of darkness, contributing to the fog of war. When technology was sponsored by Sonoma Water in 2018 to bring fire cameras to mountain tops across the County, Chief Nicholls leaned in to maximize the opportunity offered by the cameras that never sleep and are accessible not only to first responders but the public to aid decision making in real time.

It was this technology at the time of dispatch for the Kincadee Fire that allowed Chief Nicholls and others to recognize a conflagration fire was developing and would ultimately require the evacuation of over 180,000 county residents and become the largest fire in county history.

Chief Nicholls had a key role in the creation of the Evacuation zone and collaboration with the Sheriff's Office

and the Department of Emergency Management. The loss of lives during the 2017 Fires drove the need to improve the evacuation process. Pre-identified evacuation zones were created and shared with the public to reduce evacuation times. The results of that work contributed significantly to the fact that from the Kincade Fire to present, there have been no fatalities, and firefighters have been able to focus on suppression of the fire rather than rescue trapped civilians.

It became clear to Chief Nicholls that good fire and proactive strategically placed fuel breaks would make a difference in future conflagration fires.

Chief Nicholls made prescribed fire implementation a priority in the County to create a more wildfire-resilient landscape, as well as increase the chances of containing future wildfires. The CAL FIRE West Division firefighters have treated over 5,200 acres during the last 5 years along with fire practitioners from other fire agencies, State Parks, County Parks, prescribed burn entities, as well as individual property owners. This work has created generational change in the way fire is viewed and used across the County and the State.

Chief Nicholls fostered partnerships across the County, understanding that we are stronger working as a team. This was the case during the Point Fire in 2024, where a seamless team consisting of CAL FIRE, Local Fire Agencies, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, and the Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management utilized all of the improvements made since 2017 including rapid evacuation, technologies including satellite connectivity, and the Counties All Call Mutual Aid system to overwhelm the rapidly expanding fire above the Dry Creek Valley.

The entire community is grateful to Chief Nicholls for his many years of service protecting Sonoma County.

Prior Board Actions:

None.

FISCAL SUMMARY**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

N/A

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

N/A

Attachments:

Gold Resolution.

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

None.