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Report details future fire protection needs

By: SARAH WILKINS - Staff Writer

City of San Diego, county release findings after 2007 firestorms

SAN DIEGO COUNTY -- Local officials must improve regional firefighting resources, manage fire-prone brush and improve coordination with other area and state agencies in order to lessen the impacts of future wildfires, according to separate reports released Monday.

The "after action" reports produced by the county board of supervisors and the city of San Diego detail what went right and what didn't during last year's destructive firestorms. The reports include improvements made since the deadly 2003 blazes, recommendations to bolster firefighting response and detailed chronologies of the seven fires that flared up across the county in October, leaving seven people dead, 112 injured and some 1,600 homes destroyed.

"It was an amazing confluence of circumstances," San Diego mayor Jerry Sanders said at a news conference. "... In order to be truly prepared for the next wildfire, we need to be united and well-coordinated."

The county's report includes recommendations to improve coordination with state, local and military agencies; augment mutual aid agreements with local law enforcement agencies; establish a re-entry plan for evacuated residents; refine mass-notification systems to include more homes and review protocols during all fires, rather than just "significant" ones.

The county report also highlights the need for a regional plan to manage wildland fuel, including creating defensible space around homes, as well as improving regional firefighting resources that would increase firefighters' capabilities in the first 48 hours of a blaze, when outside assistance is scarce. Other suggestions include the purchase of additional firefighting helicopters and fire engines and other vehicles, such as trucks that apply fire-resistant gel to homes.

Some steps are already being implemented: The city of San Diego is in the process of purchasing a second helicopter, and Sanders announced Monday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is providing a \$2.4 million grant to clear brush in the city over the next two years.

County supervisors are also studying a multimillion dollar plan to purchase 50 fire trucks that could be placed strategically around the county.

The reports do not include the cost of implementing the changes, nor do they provide suggestions for funding them.

"We've decided to figure out what our needs are before deciding how to fund it," said Greg Cox, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors. All of the recommendations detailed in the county report are expected to be implemented over the next year, he said.

The report also details what went right during the fires, including several recommendations made after the 2003 firestorm, such as the implementation of the AlertSanDiego and Reverse 911 mass notification systems, which provided evacuation and other notices to about 587,000 residents -- the largest single fire evacuation in the nation's history. Authorities also praised the use of the 211 nonemergency number, which gave up-to-date disaster information.

"Reverse 911 ... overall went well," Cox said. "211 was a tremendous service to the public and removed a lot of calls that would have otherwise gone to 911."

The reports also reflected on the successes of the shelters set up around the county, the evacuation of hospitals and skilled nursing facilities and the relatively low number of injuries and fatalities compared to the total number of people evacuated.

The county document cost just under \$100,000 and was compiled by URS Corp. using information collected from numerous agencies, including the county Office of Emergency Services, the California Highway Patrol, CalTrans and SDG&E. The city report was a collaboration of city agencies, including the Fire Department.

The documents, produced in cooperation with the assistance of EG&G Technical Services Inc, do not address the response by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection or the creation of a unified county fire department, both of which are addressed in separate report. The CDF report is expected in the coming weeks.

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