

What is “County Fire”?

A review of fire protection in County Service Area 48

Summary

A Grand Jury investigation into fire protection services in Santa Cruz County revealed the following key issues:

- The term “County Fire,” commonly used to describe fire protection services provided by the County, is misleading. The boundaries of County Fire do not include all rural, unincorporated areas of Santa Cruz County.
- Although there is only one County Fire contract that covers two separate county service areas, the areas vary significantly in terms of cost, coverage and government responsibility. Under a \$2 million agreement with Cal Fire, the State is responsible for County Service Area (CSA) 48, which covers most, but not all, of the rural areas in the county, or 286 square miles. The County is responsible for a small, 0.2 square mile area known as Pajaro Dunes (CSA 4), which Cal Fire services under an \$840,000 agreement with the County. (See Map, Appendix A.)
- Volunteer fire companies are key to the fire protection of rural areas of Santa Cruz County.
- Because they include Cal Fire station responses only, the call reports provided by Cal Fire to the Board of Supervisors are incomplete.
- To offset rising costs of County Fire, the Board of Supervisors chose to reduce costs by cutting staffing. To evaluate the effects of staffing reductions properly, the board needs to know how to interpret call reports provided by Cal Fire.
- The majority of emergency calls are not fire-related, but fire engines are always dispatched.
- Even though County Fire is often the first responder to medical emergencies, it is not part of Emergency Medical Services Integration Authority (EMSIA), the entity established to integrate fire agency medical services into a countywide system.

While commending the vital service that Cal Fire and volunteer fire companies provide to Santa Cruz County Fire, the Grand Jury believes there is room for improvement in how fire protection services are structured, overseen and reported.

Definitions

Amador Plan: An agreement under which Santa Cruz County government pays Cal Fire for fire and rescue services provided during winter/non-fire season

CAIRS: California All Incident Reporting System is a statewide emergency incident data program that collects, compiles, analyzes and distributes statistical information reported by the California Fire Service.

Cal Fire: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection is dedicated to the fire

protection and stewardship of local wild lands. The Department also provides emergency services. As of 2007, Cal Fire is the new name for the State Fire Department, formerly known as CDF.

CSA: County Service Areas can be formed to provide residents in rural areas with services that are not generally provided by existing business or government agencies.² The Board of Supervisors serves as the governing body for County Service Areas.³

ECC: Cal Fire Emergency Command Center is responsible for dispatching County Fire resources.

FDAC: Fire Department Advisory Commission’s primary duties are to advise the County Fire Chief and the Board of Supervisors.

LAFCO: The Local Agency Formation Commission was created by state law in 1963 to regulate the boundaries of cities and special districts.⁴

Mutual/Automatic Aid: Contractual assistance between agencies. Mutual aid is assistance that is dispatched, upon request, by a responding agency. Automatic aid is assistance that is dispatched automatically.

Proposition 172: Passed in 1993, this state proposition funds local public safety services. The County Board of Supervisors has the discretion to change the allocation of these funds.

Schedule A: An agreement under which local government pays Cal Fire for year-round fire protection/emergency services.

Background

The State of California is responsible for fire protection in the rural unincorporated areas of Santa Cruz County. Cal Fire is required to provide this service only during state-declared fire season, which is normally five months a year. The County is not required to provide fire protection in unincorporated areas, but through long-running cooperative agreements, the County has paid Cal Fire to provide such service.

County Fire depends on the participation of organized volunteer fire companies. “The volunteer companies allow for a level of staffing and distribution of fire stations and equipment that could not otherwise be accomplished.”⁵ Volunteers are professionally trained firefighters but are non-salaried. The County funds a Cal Fire officer year-round to manage the training of volunteers. Volunteer companies rely on community donations to support the purchase or upgrade of equipment and to assist in the upkeep of fire stations otherwise not supported by county funds. There are five volunteer companies located in CSA 48. All but one of these volunteer companies operates out of its own fire station. The company that does not is co-located at a Cal Fire facility.

² Department of Public Works, County of Santa Cruz, <http://www.dpw.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/csa.htm>

³ Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors home page, <http://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/bds/ctysupvs.htm>

⁴ Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission, <http://www.santacruzlafco.org/pages/whatislafco.html>

⁵ Santa Cruz County Fire Department Master Plan July 1, 2002 Through June 30, 2006. May 2002. County Fire Department.

The Santa Cruz LAFCO released a recent study analyzing the impact of reorganizing fire service providers in the South County. The study determined that if the southern portion of CSA 48 were removed through reorganization, sufficient revenues may not be available for the rest of CSA 48 to maintain County Fire. LAFCO is also reviewing a proposed detachment of the community of Bonny Doon from CSA 48.

Findings

1. “County Fire” is a generic term used to describe fire protection services provided in the rural parts of the county but has two different meanings depending upon the agency using it:
 - Includes both CSA 48 and CSA 4^{6,7}
 - Includes only CSA 48^{8,9,10}
2. The County Fire contract provides fire and rescue services for two separate county service areas: CSA 48 (286 sq. mi.) and CSA 4 (Pajaro Dunes, 0.2 sq. mi.). Pajaro Dunes is a beachfront development located on the southern tip of the county.
3. All of CSA 48 is a State Responsibility Area except for the farmlands on the county’s North Coast and the farmlands that surround Pajaro Dunes. Cal Fire is, therefore, responsible for preventing and suppressing fires in this CSA.
4. County Fire does not include all the state responsibility areas in Santa Cruz County. Notably excluded is the area within the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District.
5. CSA 4 is a Local Responsibility Area. The County is required to provide fire protection services in this CSA.
6. By county ordinance, the Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC) was established to advise the Board of Supervisors and County Fire Chief on budgeting, personnel, and other concerns relating to CSA 48 fire protection, rescue and emergency services.
7. The County Fire contract consists of three different cooperative agreements. Two are related to CSA 48, and a separate agreement is for CSA 4.
 - The two agreements for CSA 48 are
 - Amador Plan, wherein the county government pays Cal Fire for fire and rescue service during the winter/non-fire season. There are four Cal Fire stations in this agreement.

⁶ Coastal Incident Response Plan, August 2005 <http://sccounty01.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/oes/Coastal%20Incident%20Response%20Plan%202005v1.5.pdf> (page 16 of 53).

⁷ County Fire Contract for FY 2007-2008 as signed by the Director of General Services, http://sccounty01.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/bds/Govstream/BDSvData/non_legacy/Minutes/2008/20080212/PDF/069.pdf

⁸ County Service Area (CSA) 48 contains all areas served by the County Fire Department, except the Pajaro Dunes development, which constitutes County Service Area 4” – page 3. Santa Cruz County Volunteer Firefighter Handbook [Revised: November 2003].

⁹ LAFCO – Countywide Service Review 2005: CSA 48 is County Fire and CSA 4 is Pajaro Dunes.

¹⁰ 2007-2008 Secured Property Tax Bill special assessments for parcels in CSA 48 labeled County Fire and CSA 4 labeled Pajaro Dunes.

- Schedule A, which provides a year-round Fire Marshal,¹¹ ECC, volunteer training, vehicle maintenance and administrative support services.
 - CSA 4 consists of a single Schedule A agreement, which provides Pajaro Dunes with year-round two-operator engine staffing.
8. In CSA 48, Cal Fire retains full control of state resources (personnel, vehicles, equipment) and can reassign these to meet emergency needs elsewhere in the state. In contrast, the Pajaro Dunes Schedule A year-round agreement requires Cal Fire to always staff and maintain a fire station in CSA 4.
9. There are four Cal Fire Amador Plan stations and five volunteer companies in CSA 48:

<p><i>Cal Fire Amador Stations</i> Big Creek Burrell Corralitos* Saratoga Summit</p>

<p><i>Volunteer Company Stations</i> Bonny Doon – Martin Rd. Bonny Doon – McDermott Corralitos* Davenport Las Cumbres Loma Prieta</p>
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*Cal Fire and volunteers co-located

(See Map, Appendix A, and Sources/Websites: [Santa Cruz County Fire Interactive Map¹²](#).)

10. Cal Fire prepares the annual operating budget for County Fire. In 2007-2008 this budget is \$2,870,629 including \$2,030,354 for CSA 48 and \$840,275 for CSA 4.
11. The primary funding sources for County Fire are property taxes and special assessments. The majority of CSA 48 property owners in 2007-2008 were assessed \$117 per parcel and CSA 4 property owners \$669.80. Secondary funding sources come from Proposition 172 funds and grants.
12. A special election was held in fall 2007 that would have nearly doubled the CSA 48 special assessment in order to offset the increasing cost of the Amador Plan staffing and equipment replacement. This ballot measure failed and, as a result, budget reductions were required.
13. The County Fire contract prepared by Cal Fire has been inconsistent from year to year:
- The 2007-2008 Amador agreement showed three stations, but the 2006-2007 agreement showed four stations.
 - The 2007-2008 Amador agreement totaled \$53,267, but the 2005-2006 agreement totaled \$711,590. The much lower cost in 2007-2008 was due to firefighter

¹¹ The Fire Marshal duties include fire code enforcement, plan review, inspection and addressing services.
¹²

<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=105229572859786697499.00044308a6fb925404fc3&hl=en&ie=UTF8&z=10>

personnel, the most significant cost component, being listed on the Schedule A agreement instead of on the Amador agreement.

14. Santa Cruz County Office of Emergency Services (OES) under the General Services Department administers the County Fire contract and Cal Fire manages County Fire on a day-to-day basis.
15. The cost of the Amador Plan is dependent on the length of the state-declared fire season. The longer the fire season, the longer the state rather than the county is obligated to fund staffing for state-run fire stations.
16. The final 2007-2008 Amador Plan included 29 Cal Fire firefighters. Of these, 12 officers were paid by the state, and 17 seasonal firefighters were fully funded by the county. The majority of firefighters were not paid, with approximately 74 active volunteers in CSA 48.
17. During the last four months of the 2007-2008 Amador Plan, firefighter staffing was reduced. On a rotating schedule, instead of assigning three engine operators to all four stations, one station was reduced to two engine operators each week. Cal Fire assigned other state-paid personnel to the fire stations based on anticipated need.
18. A significant portion of the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District is classified as State Responsibility Area but in contrast to CSA 48 has a single fire station with a year-round Cal Fire contract for two engine operators.
19. Only 0.4 percent of approximately \$16 million in Proposition 172 funds are designated to the 2007-2008 County Fire budget with the remainder going to county law enforcement.
20. The average age of fire engines ready to respond is 15 years, but County Fire recommends maintaining an average age of less than ten years. The replacement cost of an engine is approximately \$350,000.¹³
21. The community of Paradise Park is located within the boundaries of CSA 48. (See Map, Appendix A.) Because of the distance to the nearest County Fire station, it is impractical for them to service this community, so Paradise Park's fire protection services are contracted out to the City of Santa Cruz.
22. Fees collected for fire marshal services do not cover the cost of operations. FDAC recommended recently that fire marshal staffing be reduced in an effort to match spending with revenues.¹⁴
23. CSA 48 fully funds the position of addressing clerk in the General Services Department. The addressing clerk updates and maintains the database of street names and locations. All emergency personnel in the county have access to this updated information to accurately locate addresses. FDAC recommended recently that the County Office of Emergency Services assume the funding for this position.¹²

¹³ California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection/Santa Cruz County Fire Department. Five-Year Mobile Equipment Replacement Plan for Fiscal Years 2006-2011.

¹⁴ County of Santa Cruz Fire Department Advisory Commission, draft minutes for the March 19, 2008, meeting.

24. Cal Fire enters dispatch information into and draws statistics from the California All Incident Response System (CAIRS) database. CAIRS data was used to prepare the County Fire call reports presented to the Board of Supervisors.
25. A type of CAIRS report, Resources Activity, shows dispatch data for four different time points: dispatch, enroute, on-scene, return to quarter. Each incident is identified using the following fields: incident type, location, area and unit.
26. The majority of emergency incidents are not fire related yet fire personnel and heavy equipment are dispatched routinely. (See Appendix B.)
27. The Emergency Medical Services Integration Authority (EMSIA) was established to administer a program to integrate fire agency emergency medical services into a countywide system.
28. In the rural areas of the county, firefighters are normally the first medically trained responders to arrive on the scene of an emergency.
29. Cal Fire and volunteer firefighters are trained and certified to provide basic life support services.
30. The County contracts with American Medical Response to provide medically necessary ambulance transport staffed with advanced life support paramedics.
31. The Board of Supervisors asked County Fire management to provide monthly incident reports to evaluate the effects of reduced staffing approved in February 2008. Matching a 10-day period of ECC audio dispatches¹⁵ to corresponding CAIRS Resource Activity reports revealed
 - A single incident can have multiple responses.
 - Every dispatch is reported as an incident response regardless of actual on-scene arrival. Volunteer company responses are not included.
 - Adjoining fire district responses are not included.
 - Ambulance responses are not included.
32. Emergency calls from County Fire are first routed to the Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communications Center (Netcom). Since the State requires Cal Fire to command its resources, Netcom must relay the initial call and pass control of the dispatch to the Cal Fire ECC.
33. County Fire responds to medical emergency calls but is not a member of the Emergency Medical Services Integration Authority (EMSIA).¹⁶ The Cal Fire Chief is on the EMSIA Board of Directors only on behalf of the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District.
34. The Cal Fire Unit Chief for both San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties is designated as the Chief of County Fire and the Santa Cruz County Fire Department. Approximately 20 percent of his time is spent on Santa Cruz County support.

¹⁵ Firescan.net, <http://www.firescan.net/>

¹⁶ “Surviving Sudden Cardiac Arrest: Improving the Odds with Automated External Defibrillators, Santa Cruz County Grand Jury 2006-2007 Final Report with Responses, pages 4-5.

35. The FDAC represents CSA 48 and its role is to advise the County Fire Chief and the County Board of Supervisors. FDAC does not represent CSA 4.
36. The county code for FDAC membership was amended in 2005 to reduce membership from 13 seats to 10 seats, eliminating two representatives from the Health Services Agency (one each from Emergency Medical Services and Environmental Health) and one from Public Works, due to their poor attendance records.
37. Although several volunteer fire companies and Cal Fire maintain websites, there is no County Fire website.

Conclusions

1. “County Fire” is a confusing term, implying the existence of a single department responsible for fire protection in the rural areas of the county.
2. Because fire safety personnel are listed incorrectly on the year-round Schedule A agreement, the true cost of the Amador Plan is not clear.
3. The 2007-2008 County Fire contract total of \$2,870,629 is misleading due to the inclusion of Pajaro Dunes. Pajaro Dunes is a Local Responsibility Area and not a State Responsibility Area. The Pajaro Dunes Schedule A agreement is \$840,275, close to one-third of the total County Fire contract.
4. A significant cost factor in the Amador Plan is the length of the state-declared fire season. For example, a fire season extended by one month could equal a savings to the county of approximately 15 percent on the original contracted amount.
5. Significant capital spending to replace aging equipment is overdue.
6. Proposition 172 funds seem disproportionately distributed.
7. The call reports presented to the Board of Supervisors by County Fire management are incomplete. These reports do not show all the responses made to emergency incidents. Volunteer, mutual/automatic aid and ambulance responses are critical in evaluating County Fire performance.
8. Emergency responses are delayed due to the additional time required for Netcom to relay calls to the Cal Fire ECC.
9. Though Paradise Park is located in CSA 48, the Santa Cruz City Fire Department can reach this community much faster than the more distant County Fire stations, so contracting fire protection to the city is appropriate.
10. Because other agencies also benefit from the work of the addressing clerk, it is inequitable that the cost of this position is borne entirely by CSA 48.
11. Active input to the Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC) from a Health Services Agency representative is necessary because medically related incidents comprise a major component of County Fire responses.
12. Because Cal Fire officers concurrently manage both state resources and those of County Fire, conflicts may arise when decisions are made to prioritize issues involving the state and county fire protection resources.

13. An effective way to enhance the public’s understanding of County Fire is to create a page on the county government website.

Recommendations

1. The label “County Fire” should be applied only to County Service Area 48 and not CSA 4. The Pajaro Dunes Schedule A service agreement should be removed from future County Fire contracts.
2. The Cal Fire contract should clearly present the services paid by the County so that FDAC, General Services Dept/OES and Board of Supervisors may properly review and understand the services provided in the contract.
3. The Board of Supervisors should carefully scrutinize FDAC recommendations for Cal Fire services with the knowledge that these recommendations are heavily influenced and prioritized by Cal Fire officers who also manage County Fire.
4. A County Fire web page should be created, with a link available on the Santa Cruz County Government home page. The County Fire web page could include the Cal Fire cooperative agreements that make up the contract and links to the Cal Fire and participating volunteer company web sites.
5. All fire company volunteers should receive recognition from the Board of Supervisors, with particular commendations to long-time volunteers.
6. County Fire management needs to explain the parameters that shape its incident reporting to the Board of Supervisors, and the supervisors should understand the elements involved in tracking incident responses. This knowledge is required to understand properly what is being reported.
7. County Fire management should include the responses of volunteer companies and other mutual aid when evaluating the effects of reduced staffing.
8. The FDAC should include a representative of the Health Services Agency to add perspective to medical response issues.
9. County Fire should be made a member of the Emergency Medical Services Integration Authority (EMSIA).
10. Paradise Park should be detached from CSA 48.
11. All agencies using addressing clerk services should share in the cost.
12. The Board of Supervisors should review the allocation of Proposition 172 funds.
13. The Board of Supervisors should examine fire marshal services for ways to reduce County Fire cost.

Commendations

1. The Grand Jury commends all firefighters for performing a vital service and for their willingness to put their health and lives at risk.

2. We especially commend the volunteer firefighters for providing essential fire protection and emergency rescue services, and for making major contributions of time devoted to training and certification.
3. The Grand Jury commends the volunteer fire company auxiliaries for their fundraising efforts and support of their local volunteer firefighters and fire stations.

Responses Required

Respondent	Findings	Recommendations	Respond Within / Respond By
County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors	1, 3-5, 7, 8, 13, 18, 19-24, 26, 29-37	1-6, 10, 12, 13	60 Days September 1, 2008
County of Santa Cruz Fire Department	1, 8, 13, 22, 26, 31, 33, 34, 37	1-7, 10	90 Days October 1, 2008
County of Santa Cruz General Services Department	1, 3-5, 7, 8, 13, 19, 20, 22, 23, 29-37	2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11	90 Days October 1, 2008
County of Santa Cruz Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC)	1, 3-5, 13, 19, 26, 31, 33-37	1-13	90 Days October 1, 2008
County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency	36	8, 9	90 Days October 1, 2008
Emergency Medical Services Integration Authority (EMSIA)	33	9	90 Days October 1, 2008
Santa Cruz Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO)	21	10	90 Days October 1, 2008

Sources

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 County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency Public Health Department– Emergency Medical Services, <http://www.santacruzhealth.org/phealth/ems/3ems.htm>
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Loma Prieta Fire and Rescue, <http://www.lomaprietafire.org/>

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Volunteer Data (Password protected, not publicly accessible)

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Interviews

Cal Fire Officers

Cal Fire Staff

County Fire Officers

County Fire Firefighters

Santa Cruz County Auditor Controller’s Office

Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency

Santa Cruz County General Services Department

Santa Cruz LAFCO Office

Volunteer Fire Companies



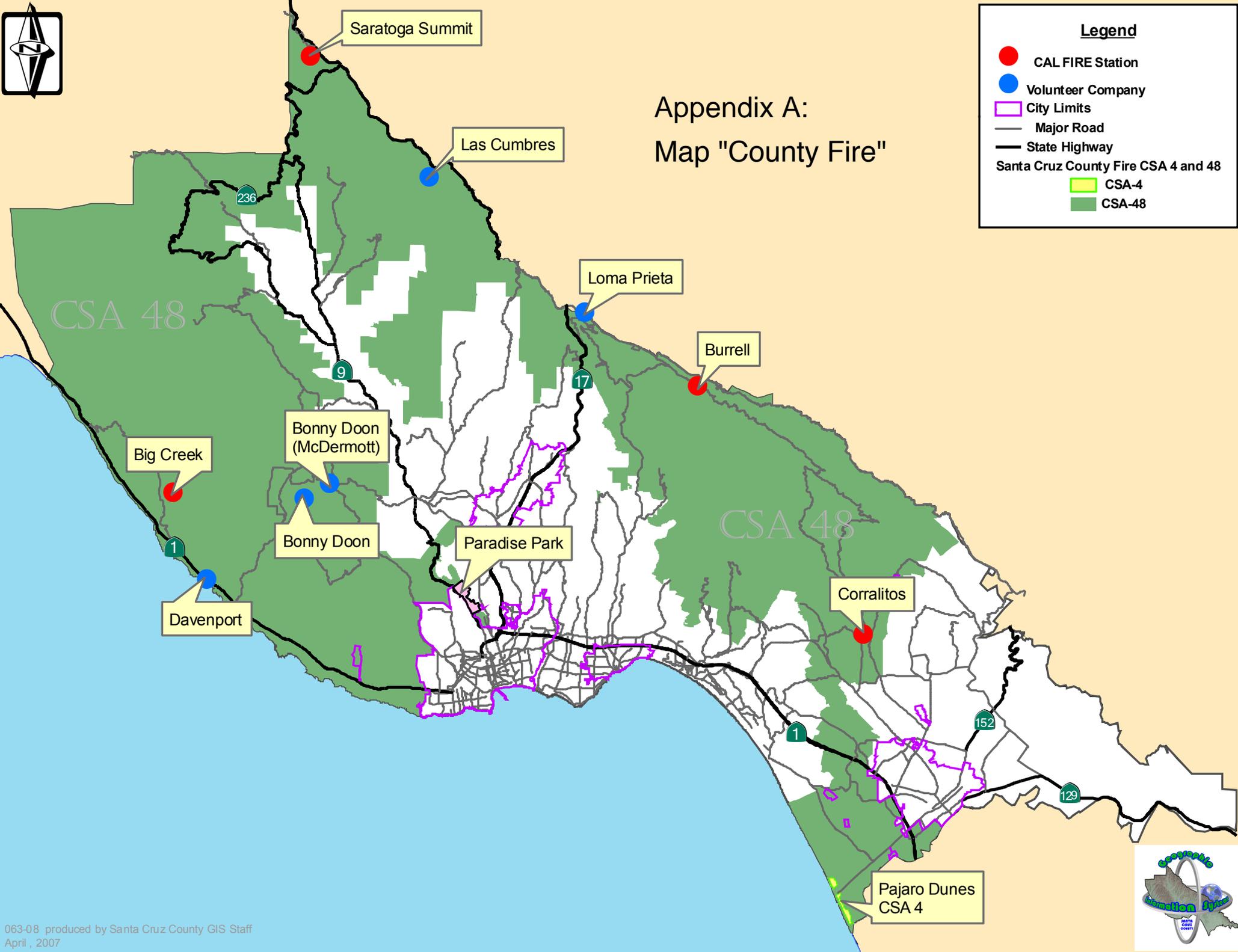
Appendix A: Map "County Fire"

Legend

- CAL FIRE Station
- Volunteer Company
- City Limits
- Major Road
- State Highway

Santa Cruz County Fire CSA 4 and 48

- CSA-4
- CSA-48



Appendix B**Santa Cruz County Fire 2006-2007 Incident Breakdown**

Incident Type	2006	2007
Medical	546	735
Structure Fire	89	66
Wildland Fire	92	138
Vehicle Fire	39	32
Other Fire	217	520
Traffic Collision	263	327
Rescue	16	17
Hazardous Conditions	194	108
Law Enforcement	13	18
Public Assistance	61	87
Hazardous Material	13	14
Other	129	319
Total	1672	2381

