

Fire and Fire
of Felton to 1989

County report recounts failure of 911 system

By JOHN ROBINSON
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SANTA CRUZ — The equipment failure in the county's 911 system that left dispatchers unable to page firefighters to an Oct. 11 Boulder Creek fire was pinpointed in a report prepared Monday by Mel Angel, the county's emergency services administrator.

The report recounts, minute by minute, the dispatchers' desperate scramble to notify firefighters of the emergency. It took crews 24 minutes to reach the house, which burned to the ground.

According to 911 dispatch tapes obtained by the Sentinel and to the report, which was requested by Boulder Creek Fire Chief Bud

Tomlin, dispatchers discovered the problem a few minutes before the Boulder Creek fire was reported.

The problem was discovered when dispatchers paged Branciforte Fire Department at 3:26 p.m. for a medical aid call, but got no response.

Two minutes later, as is standard, dispatchers repeated the page.

A Santa Cruz firefighter then called 911 to report that the page went out over the wrong channel.

Dispatchers then reached Branciforte firefighters on a hotline to the station, and began running paging tests.

At 3:32 p.m., dispatchers confirmed they were unable to page firefighters and a dispatcher ran

back to the adjoining equipment room to ask a technician what was wrong.

The technician told officials that he had disconnected paging equipment shortly before the dispatcher came in.

The work was part of a system upgrade which had been in progress for six months. The technician told officials that he believed a backup system was working. A component in the backup system, however, was not receiving enough power to send out a signal.

When the technician discovered the problem, he said he began rewiring the equipment.

Angel said the equipment now has been modified so that such a problem will not recur. The county

and fire departments are also looking into a system that will immediately register if a page has been received.

At 3:33 p.m. the Boulder Creek fire was reported to 911 by the resident, Elsie Bosso.

On the tape, Bosso sounds calm, and tells the operator that her house is filled with smoke and that she thinks a woodpile in back may be on fire.

A minute later, Boshill hung up and Boulder Creek Fire was paged at 3:35 p.m.

The page didn't go through.

Dispatchers then called the fire station on a hotline, but got no answer. The department is a volunteer department, and the station is not continuously occupied.

Four minutes after 911 was notified of the fire, operators began scrambling to locate firefighters.

Over the next few minutes, the tape becomes a cacophony of voices as a constant stream of calls comes in to report the fire and dispatchers begin calling other numbers and additional fire stations.

By 3:41 p.m. — eight minutes after the initial call — dispatchers had contacted the state Department of Forestry, Santa Cruz and Felton fire departments asking if they could page Boulder Creek. The departments said they were unable to.

A Santa Cruz shift commander then suggested that dispatchers ask another department to respond. Dispatchers requested CDF to go to the fire.

About this time, a junior volunteer firefighter at San Lorenzo Valley High School overheard dispatchers asking Felton firefighters, who happened to be fighting a ve-

hicle fire at the school, if they could help page Boulder Creek. The volunteer told Felton firefighters to call Boulder Creek Hardware, where two Boulder Creek fire captains work.

The first Boulder Creek firefighter called 911 at 3:44 p.m., 11 minutes after the fire was reported, and left for the station.

At 3:48 p.m., the first fire engine, from Ben Lomond, reported that it was en route, a little under 15 minutes after the first 911 call. Within the next three minutes fire crews from Boulder Creek, CDF and Ben Lomond responded.

The first engines arrived at the fire at about 3:57 p.m., just less than 24 minutes after it was reported.

When firefighters arrived the house was filled with flames. Loss was placed at \$120,000.

Fire investigators said it is doubtful the house could have been saved, even if firefighters had been paged on time.

REFERENCE

