

Fire Agencies Cite Concerns

County Resources Soon Exhausted During Storm, Says COA

By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

County government and other local agencies responded "with great dispatch and cooperation" to the early January storm emergency, but the county's resources were quickly exhausted in the fight against floods and slides, according to a county report released Tuesday.

Acting County Administrator George Newell told county supervisors, "The county and the local agencies were able to respond to and provide emergency relief for the thousands of citizens threatened by the storm's destruction.

"The one major exception was in the area of providing emergency access where roads had been closed due to landslides," Newell said.

"In the area of private roads," Newell reported, "no program was in effect to provide for clearing these roads in a quick and effective manner (and) there still remain many private roads which have no emergency access.

"The program implemented by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and administered by the state Office of Emergency Services has been laboriously slow and in many cases has served to exacerbate the problem."

The Board of Supervisors accepted the report and set May 4 for discussion.

The report lists the toll of the

devastating 100-year storm that hit the area Jan. 3-5:

- Twenty-two persons killed, more than 300 homes destroyed, hundreds of homes damage, five businesses destroyed and 50 damaged, more than 50 public roads and more than 100 private roads closed, electricity and telephone service out in more than 70 percent of the county.

- Agriculture suffered \$1 million loss.

In the wake of the disaster, the county Fire Chiefs Association met and critiqued the county and emergency services efforts and the problems that occurred.

The association made a number of recommendations to the county: it should adopt an emergency system that is used nationally, better equip the county's emergency center, be quick in activating the emergency center and update the county's emergency plans.

Fire chiefs listed their problems and concerns:

Boulder Creek stated the local emergency services office should be manned 24 hours in an emergency and it should be made clear to everyone who is running the emergency operation. Boulder Creek also said it was "abandoned by law enforcement" during the time it was cut off and that it should have a stockpile of hospital goods in the area since it is easily cut off during storms.

Ben Lomond said it had trouble with finding victims and their location

in emergency housing and that the Red Cross was too slow in responding and they had trouble in getting food and bedding for victims during the first 24 hours. It was difficult handling the calls from relatives and friends. They also want clarification on what equipment can be ordered and complained they were promised equipment at times during the storm and it never came.

Felton also said that calls from relatives took many hours to handle and that notice of the state of emergency didn't reach the fire stations for 24 hours. Felton said that communications were "lacking" between the field and County Communications and wants the county to clarify actions that can be taken prior to the declaration of a local emergency. Felton, in one wry note, advised the county it could get sandbags from a supplier in Modesto the next time it had trouble getting the bags.

Zayante wants clarification of the line of authority and said it "wishes the county had more faith in the fire departments on the scene."

Branciforte questioned if county officials were aware of the magnitude of the problem, asked if sandbags were available, asked if the five fire radio frequencies could be set for five separate zones, and reminded the county that geologists had pinpointed the expected trouble areas. They also noted there were major problems with private roads. Branciforte complimented emergency services for

getting pumps to help combat the rising San Lorenzo River.

Capitola complained that field units were not told that County Communications was planning to move to the East Santa Cruz fire station when the river waters were on the rise.

Soquel questioned why radio zones were not used and why they had problems contacting county officials.

Aptos said that more pre-disaster preparation is necessary and told the county to establish a local plan. They said that Granite Construction (in some areas) was called in by homeowners' associations for damage repairs rather than rely on the county. Aptos advised County Communications to "prioritize" emergency calls during a disaster.

La Selva said it had firefighters available to help out in other areas and no one bothered to call them.

Freedom asked if a fire official could be sent to County Communications to help and if fire units from various areas could be called to a central location and dispatched from there during an major area or countywide emergency.

Watsonville noted that in its area they've had a surplus hospital abandoned (and apparently lost to use), that the 9-1-1 system was out of order during the first part of the emergency and charged the county would not respond to the need for storm drainage clearance and flood control for levees. Watsonville also questioned the efficiency of the county

Emergency Services Office in reporting to the sheriff.

Aromas said it had volunteers available and contractors with backhoes and tankers available to be called in.

California Division of Forestry asked the Fire Chiefs Association task force that is further investigating the emergency response to investigate the pre-purchase of sandbags. It advised the county to activate the Emergency Services Office in the early stages of an emergency and to activate and review plans with the emergency disaster council. Also, Forestry said the problems should be discussed with the county's regularly appointed emergency officer, Bill Plageman. At the time of the emergency, Newell took over as he is legally the official responsible in an emergency. The takeover caused some of the confusion.

In his report, Newell states, "As early as Jan. 3, the county had placed its work crews on alert to respond to what was anticipated as a normal winter rainstorm.

"By Jan. 4, realizing that the storm was of major proportions, the county declared a state of local emergency and began responding to emergency calls and evacuating residents in areas where flooding was imminent.

"On Jan. 5, the Board of Supervisors proclaimed a state of local emergency and requested similar action by the governor."

While congratulating the county work force and the emergency forces around the county, Newell notes, "The county maintains only a small road department and utilizes private contractors for its major road work.

"As a result, the county began experiencing a cash flow problem in its ability to pay.

Overall, the fire chiefs had high praise for County Communications.

Association President Steve Negro wrote to County Communications Director Mel Angel, "At our association meeting of Jan. 21, every member in attendance had nothing but praise for the manner in which the dispatchers handled themselves and the monumental task that the disaster presented."

Santa Cruz Ambulance Service President Paul T. Shirley joined in that praise, saying, "I appreciate the fine job (the) dispatchers did during our recent disaster."

"The professionalism demonstrated by each member of your staff reflected well on your organization," Shirley wrote.

Also, the county Seniors Commission had high praise for the county's social workers who worked through the disaster to aid senior citizens and others.

Newell has recommended that supervisors approve publication of an Emergency Services Tabloid and that it reactivate the Disaster Council that has existed only on paper over the past few years.