

Executive Summary

In November of 2002, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (the Board) formed the Humboldt County Fire Safe Council (HCFSC) to oversee the preparation of a Master Fire Protection Plan (MFPP). The HCFSC membership consists of individuals representing different groups in the fire service community. In forming the Council, the Board recognized that: “community-based fire plans are a concept born out of the statewide Fire Safe Council, whose goal is to preserve California’s natural and structural resources by mobilizing all Californians to make their homes, neighborhoods and communities fire safe.” This MFPP was prepared to acknowledge the individuals and organizations that deliver essential fire services, to focus on their needs, and to support them in their efforts to maintain and improve the delivery of these services to communities throughout the County. Additionally, because the County of Humboldt does have a responsibility to protect the public’s health, safety, and welfare, it has played a key role in the preparation of the MFPP. In recognition of the County’s responsibility to the safety of its citizens and to insure the success of the MFPP, the HCFSC recommends that the County continue to have a significant role in the implementation of the plan.

The MFPP is intended to serve as the guiding document for reducing the risk of fire to Humboldt County communities. Policy recommendations from the MFPP will supplement the Natural Resources and Hazards Report that supports the preparation of the Humboldt County General Plan, thus influencing future development patterns. Additionally, the MFPP is designed to meet Healthy Forest Restoration Act criteria for Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) by engaging in a collaborative process, prioritizing fuel reduction activities, and recommending treatments for reducing structural ignitability.

The Board selected consultants Planwest Partners, RNB Spatial Data, Incorporated, and ForEverGreen Forestry to assist the HCFSC and County Planning staff in preparing the Fire Plan, with a Scope-of-Work that focused on:

- Creating a community-based planning process
- Coordinating the plans, efforts and fire risk reduction programs of all local, state, and federal fire protection organizations
- Using state-of-the-art Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping to spatially display community assets, fire risks, protection capabilities and fuel treatment projects
- Encouraging the formation of local volunteer Fire Safe Councils to create fire defensible communities.

In implementing this Scope-of-Work, the HCFSC, Consultants, and Planning staff conducted extensive studies and meetings with all of the 42 local, state, and federal organizations that deliver emergency response services within Humboldt County. In completing this work, the HCFSC found a group of highly dedicated professionals and volunteers who are doing a remarkable job with extremely limited resources.

The HCFSC also found that volunteers with varying degrees of experience, training and equipment are primarily responsible for delivering emergency response services, that there is a

lack of comprehensive county-wide planning or coordination, that several communities have been identified as being at risk for catastrophic fire, that access to services is more limited in rural areas, and that over 40% of the land area in the County currently has no fire department with a formal commitment to deliver these services on a year round basis. Additionally, many areas receive fire protection services on a “good will” basis from local district fire departments even though they are not located within the department’s area of jurisdictional responsibility.

Local agencies and volunteer fire departments are formed to provide fire protection and emergency medical response services throughout the county. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) is responsible for vegetation fires in State Responsibility Areas (SRA). Federal land management agencies are responsible for providing wildland fire protection for federal lands within the county, and the Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribes provide funding, equipment, and facilities for volunteer fire departments in their respective reservations.

In addition to the agencies and organizations that provide fire protection services, seven local Fire Safe Councils (FSCs) are active in Humboldt County and involved with public fire safe education and fire prevention programs in their communities. These seven FSCs are the: Lower Mattole, Orleans/Somes Bar, Southern Humboldt, Fruitland Ridge, Van Duzen Watershed, Cathey Road, and Willow Creek. Similar to the fire departments, local FSCs depend on volunteers and operate with minimal revenue. Their greatest challenges include sustaining local support and participation and securing enough funding to continue fire prevention efforts.

The MFPP incorporates the work of the FSCs and provides background on the County Fire environment and agency roles in fire planning and education, in the context of overall emergency response service delivery in the County.

Key recommendations in the MFPP include:

- Establishing minimum levels of emergency response services and making landowners aware of these levels of protection.
- Working with the Humboldt County Fire Chief’s association to develop on-going funding for these services, such as revenue exchange agreements, benefit assessments, mitigation and user fees.
- Identifying a reliable funding source or combination of funding mechanisms that will support the efforts of local Fire Safe Councils.
- Establishing regional fire training facilities in appropriate locations.
- Improving communication and coordination between local fire departments, CDF and federal fire protection services.
- Providing fire safety education to homeowners and to homebuilding, real estate, and building supply industries.
- Supporting volunteer fire department recruiting and training efforts.
- Incorporating wildland fire safety measures, fire hazard mitigations, accessible roads data, emergency water supply locations, flammable vegetation clearance for defensible space techniques, and other fire safety techniques, into local community planning.
- Updating Humboldt County Fire Safe Standards to identify specific hazard zones and improve fire safe measures.

- Emphasizing increased countywide coordination of fuel modification projects by all involved agencies and organizations.

Findings and recommendations are linked to implementation measures in extensive tables contained in the text of the Plan.

An efficient and effective fire protection service can provide significant economic benefits. Fire protection has a direct relationship to the availability and cost of fire insurance. For example, much of Humboldt County's population base is located in areas with an Insurance Services Office (ISO) Public Protection Classification (PPC) rating of 9. Lowering the rating of 9 to an 8 (a better rating) could in some instances result in up to a 21% reduction (approximately \$290 per year) in fire insurance rates for a \$200,000 home. Higher savings may be realized for property with commercial or other improvements of greater value.

Beyond the economic benefits of improving fire protection services, maintaining and improving the delivery of emergency response services and fire prevention programs within Humboldt County is essential to the well being of the people who live here. Additionally, these programs and services are vital to the protection of the rich variety of highly valued resources and assets found on the private and public lands of the County. This MFPP will enable communities and the organizations that serve them to continue to take positive steps toward making their communities fire safe.