

# **2017 - 2018 GRAND JURY REPORT**

## **CAL FIRE/ Riverside County Fire Department Palo Verde Valley Fire Protection Issues**

### **Background**

A portion of eastern Riverside County (County), along the border of Southern California and Arizona and adjacent to the Colorado River, is identified as the Palo Verde Valley. This region is mostly rural and agricultural. It serves as the ancestral home of several Native American tribes, some of whom have reservations in the area.

The city of Blythe (Blythe) is in the center of the Palo Verde Valley and is the only incorporated community in the Valley. It is located 172 miles east of the city of Riverside and 150 miles west of Phoenix, Arizona. Blythe encompasses an area of approximately 26.8 square miles, and is home to 19,693 County residents.

In 1921, the Riverside County Fire Department and the California Department of Forestry (CDF) entered into a contractual partnership whereby CDF would augment the level of wildland fire protection to the County. In 1946, the Riverside County Fire Department and CDF entered into an expanded agreement whereby CDF would provide firefighting resources (personnel), and Riverside County Fire would provide the capital assets, such as fire apparatus and stations to unincorporated areas of the County. Today, CDF is commonly referred to as CAL FIRE and the expanded agreement formed the CAL FIRE/Riverside County Fire Department (RCFD).

Currently, RCFD serves as the primary provider of fire protection and is the first responder of medical services to the rural and unincorporated areas of the County including the Palo Verde Valley. In addition, RCFD also contracts with one special district and twenty-one of the County's twenty-eight incorporated cities for fire services. Blythe, however, has its own volunteer fire department and does not contract with the RCFD.

RCFD Battalion 8 serves the Palo Verde Valley and consists of five fire stations: four active stations and one which is inactive. Three active stations are located in the unincorporated areas in and around Blythe, and the fourth station is in Desert Center (40 miles east of Coachella). The fifth station is

located on land which is currently in dispute with the Colorado River Indian Tribe (CRIT). That station currently serves only as a storage facility.

Each of Battalion 8's four active fire stations is staffed with one Captain, one Engineer, and one Firefighter, of which at least one is a fully-accredited paramedic. The majority of emergency calls received by Battalion 8 are for medical assistance which may require a paramedic to provide the necessary medical care until an ambulance arrives.

In March 2016, the RCFD received a comprehensive report from a private firm, TriData, LLC, which RCFD contracted to conduct an independent review of their resources and services. The study was based on incident frequency and response time data. The purpose of the study was to review workloads, reliability, and allocation options. It provided recommendations to improve regional cooperation to maximize service and contain costs. While the current model of countywide services has worked well, the study suggested that improvements were possible by increasing the partnership between the cities and the County on a regional basis.

## **Methodology**

The Riverside County 2017-2018 Grand Jury (Grand Jury) obtained information for this report through the review of documents, testimony of on-site personnel, department officials, and facility visits.

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with the following:

- a. Riverside County Fire Department
  - Interim Chief
  - Deputy Chief – Support Operations
  - Battalion 8 Chief – Blythe
  - Apparatus Fleet Supervisor – Indio
  - Battalion 13 Chief – Menifee
  - Captain at Station #44 – Ripley
  - Captain at Station #45 – Blythe Airport
  - Captain at Station #7 – Menifee
- b. City of Blythe Fire Department – Chief

The Grand Jury conducted the following site visits:

- a. Riverside County Fire Department
  - Administrative Office – Perris
  - Stations #43 and #45 – Blythe
  - Station #44 – Ripley
  - Station #7 – Menifee
  - Vehicle Maintenance Garage – Perris
- b. City of Blythe Fire Station

The Grand Jury reviewed the following documents:

- a. CAL FIRE/RCFD Organization Chart
- b. *RCFD Operational, Standards of Cover, and Contract Fee Analysis, Final Report*, prepared by TriData, LLC, March 2016
- c. 2014-15 Riverside County Grand Jury Report, *CAL FIRE/Riverside County Fire Department*
- d. Monthly Incident and Activity reports from the city of Blythe Fire Department to the City Council, October 2017 through April 2018

## Findings

1. Riverside County Fire Station #43, located in Blythe, is unable to sufficiently support the vehicles and equipment assigned there. The 2014-2015 Grand Jury recommended the replacement of Station #43 or relocating it to a site closer to the Colorado River. The station is not large enough to accommodate all vehicles and equipment, and is therefore, inadequate.

In the 2016 commissioned independent study by TriData of RCFD resources, several recommendations were made including the closure of Station #43 and consolidating its personnel with Station #45. The study noted that few emergency responses were required of Battalion 8 during the study period, and that few were structure fires or major emergencies.

The 2017-2018 Grand Jury visited three stations in Battalion 8 and observed the fire engine assigned to Station #43 was parked in the driveway and the rescue vehicle was on the street. This exposes the vehicles to extreme weather, tampering, and vandalism. The sun and heat causes deterioration of the paint, decals and rubber seals on the engine and pumps. Fine dust infiltrates essential electrical parts. This exposure of RCFD vehicles to the elements and to passersby on the street, including children and vagrants, is a serious problem especially when considering that a life-saving medical supply kit is onboard Engine #43, as it is on all County fire engines. The Grand Jury queried personnel of various ranks and failed to obtain a consistent answer to the question of whether the medical kits were even securely locked while onboard the vehicles.

2. The city of Blythe maintains an historic fire department which responds to calls within the city. The Fire Chief, or his designee, assembles a team and provides guidance when a call for emergency service is received. After the volunteers arrive at the station, a

firefighting team – which typically consists of a Captain, an Engineer, and a Firefighter – is dispatched to the emergency.

Public reports from the Blythe Fire Department for the period of October 2017 through April 2018 indicate that the Department received 221 calls for service. More than half of those calls were not fire-related, but for public assistance, rescues, or medical aid. The Blythe Fire Department is staffed with volunteers who are trained Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) who can only provide Basic Life Support (BLS) assistance. They are not certified paramedics and cannot provide Advance Life Support (ALS) measures, if needed. In the event ALS measures are required, EMTs must wait for the arrival of an ambulance which is staffed with a certified paramedic.

Blythe pays an annual salary to the Fire Chief and the Deputy Chief. The volunteer firemen receive a flat payment for each incident response and an additional payment when response to an incident exceeds one hour. While this may appear to be a cost saving in relation to a fully-staffed, 24-hour RCFD contract team, Blythe is spending approximately \$440,000 annually for volunteer personnel and the costs of operation, maintenance, and purchase of fire vehicles. Public records indicate that at least \$220,000 was paid to volunteers in 2016.

The Blythe Fire Department has old equipment which is subject to reliability issues. There is a newer model engine (2015), but the other two fire engines are more than 15 years old, an age when most fire companies reduce front-line use of engines and move them to back-up use. At fifteen years of age, engine reliability is questionable and servicing issues can be expensive. The historic vehicles include a 1923 fire engine and a 1975 truck.

3. RCFD Station #43 is located less than one-quarter of a mile from the Blythe Fire Department. Station #43 is staffed with a full complement of firefighting professionals, including certified paramedics. Since there is no formal agreement between the RCFD and Blythe, except for the standard mutual aid agreement that exists between all local jurisdictions, Station #43 does not respond to emergency calls within the city limits. The Grand Jury concluded that available and certified paramedics and other first responders are not being utilized to the benefit of the residents of the Palo Verde Valley or the city of Blythe.

## Recommendations

**Riverside County Board of Supervisors  
CAL FIRE/Riverside County Fire Department  
City of Blythe**

1. The Board of Supervisors (BOS), along with the RCFD, should review the prior recommendations from the 2014-2015 Grand Jury report and the independent 2016 TriData, LLC, Final Report concerning the utility of Station #43, and take appropriate actions. RCFD should relocate Station #43, or close it, and consider consolidating operations with Station #45.
2. The city of Blythe review the quality of service which they can provide with a volunteer service in light of the large number of medical assist calls within the city limits. Review the level of fire/emergency services if the County were to deactivate or move Station #43.
3. The city of Blythe form a partnership with the County of Riverside to develop a comprehensive fire and medical assistance protection plan that would better utilize existing resources and best serve the residents of the Palo Verde Valley including the city of Blythe.

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