

# ROSS VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT

777 SAN ANSELMO AVENUE  
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June 12, 2008

Marin County Civil Grand Jury  
Roberta Robinson, Foreperson  
3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 275  
San Rafael, CA 94903

Re: Grand Jury Report – Marin On Fire! Not if, But When  
Dated April 1, 2008

Dear Ms. Robinson:

The Fire Board of the Ross Valley Fire Department has received a copy of the April 1, 2008, Grand Jury Report "Marin On Fire! Not if, But When".

As required, I have enclosed one (1) copy of the Fire Board's response to Findings F1 through F9 and F12 and Recommendations R1 and R2.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you need additional information or clarification.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Thornton".

Barbara Thornton  
President

Enclosure

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## Response to findings:

### **F1. Compliance with vegetation management codes and the threat of wildland fires in Marin are not top-of-the-mind public concerns.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire partially disagrees with this finding. There have been several recent surveys that indicated that citizens in Marin are concerned with the wildland fire threat. We would agree that more education is necessary in order for the community to understand the extent of the threat.

### **F2. Easily identifiable egregious vegetation management code violations exist throughout Marin County.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire partially disagrees with this finding. Ross Valley Fire does agree that there may be easily identifiable vegetation management code violations that have not been addressed. As the report identified, there are many reasons for the inability to obtain full compliance with vegetation management codes. Egregious is defined as "conspicuously and outrageously bad or reprehensible". Within the Ross Valley Fire Service jurisdiction if a code violation meets this definition, the violation is addressed and follow-up action is taken.

### **F3. Homeowners can decrease fire risk by increasing defensible space, which reduces fuel.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire agrees with this finding.

### **F4. A number of municipalities in Marin have made significant changes in building codes for new construction and major remodels. These new Wildland-Urban Interface codes have little impact on the vast majority of Marin homeowners.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire partially disagrees with the finding. The Towns of San Anselmo and Fairfax have adopted new codes that have an effect on both new construction and substantial remodels within the Wildland Urban Interface. Like many other codes that have been adopted in the past, in time the most recent code adoption will have a significant impact on the fire and life safety within the Wildland Urban Interface.

**F5. There is inconsistency in various vegetation management codes throughout the county.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire disagrees with this finding. Each code cycle the Marin County Fire Prevention Officers meet to develop consistent county-wide amendments to the Fire Code. The latest code adoption is no exception.

**F6. Most vegetation management codes and homeowner educational materials are difficult to interpret and confusing to the layman.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire disagrees with this finding. The educational material that is available is actually straight forward and does a good job of explaining the requirements. Simple, understandable brochures have been developed by FireSafe Marin. FireSafe Marin has also produced an informational DVD – “Marin on Fire”, which explains fire-safe landscaping, fire hardening of the home, etc. in order to help the homeowner better understand the importance of vegetation management.

**F7. “Best practice” vegetation management policies require fire department access to the whole property in the company of the owner. No jurisdiction has a plan for this.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire partially disagrees with this finding. When conducting hazard inspections, access to the property and having the property owner present during the inspection has its benefits; however, many properties can be inspected without entering private property and Ross Valley Fire has had considerable success in gaining compliance without ever meeting with the property owner.

**F8. Not all Marin County fire jurisdictions proactively inspect for vegetation management code compliance without a complaint or owner request.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire agrees that not all jurisdictions conduct routine vegetation management inspections. Since the creation of the Ross Valley Fire Service in 1982, we have had a formal program for conducting routine vegetation management inspections.

**F9. Resources for fire jurisdiction inspection and enforcement are limited, and homeowner costs for compliance can be extremely high.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire agrees with the finding.

**F12. Significant progress in enforcing vegetation management and defensible space codes will require additional resources and/or a change in direction by governing boards.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire agrees that in order to make significant progress in enforcing vegetation management and defensible space that additional resources will be needed. Ross Valley Fire believes that additional resources would be best utilized by increasing public education, which would result in increased voluntary compliance with the codes.

**Response to Recommendations:**

**R1. Governing boards of all fire jurisdictions in Marin County review and update current vegetation management and defensible space codes and homeowner educational materials to be certain they are realistic, achievable, enforceable, and easily understood by the public-at-large. The boards should target completion by June 30, 2009.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire has implemented this recommendation. In fall of 2007 the Ross Valley Fire Board reviewed and updated the current vegetation management and defensible space program. Also, in the fall of 2007 the Fire Board approved a new fire inspector position whose duties will include vegetation management. In November of 2007, The Towns of San Anselmo and Fairfax adopted the latest Fire, Building and Wildland Interface Codes. Ross Valley Fire is consistently working to improve public education in this area. Ross Valley Fire will continue to evaluate its vegetation management program and make improvements where possible.

**R2. All fire jurisdictions develop plans with specific goals for compliance and enforcement of vegetation management and defensible space codes by June 30, 2009.**

Response: Ross Valley Fire has implemented the recommendation. As mentioned earlier Ross Valley Fire has a formal inspection program. The jurisdiction has been divided into nine fire inspection areas. Each spring the engine companies inspect these areas. The elements of the inspections include: checking for 30 -100 feet of defensible space, 10 feet of roadside clearance, 15 feet of vertical road clearance, removal of debris from roofs and gutters, a chimney spark arrester, and address numbering. History has proven that we have been successful in the removal of the lighter fuels, such as grass, adjacent to the homes. We have also been

successful with the removal of French and Scotch broom near homes. The current goal of the program is to concentrate our efforts where we can achieve the greatest success. This has been in dealing with the lighter fuels.

Ross Valley Fire also has a formal fire hazard complaint follow-up program. All complaints are investigated. If a code violation exists, correction notices are issued and follow-up is conducted.

Our goal is to achieve 100% compliance once a hazard notice is issued. Both the Towns of San Anselmo and Fairfax have ordinances in place that allow us to abate hazards if the circumstances warrant.