



COUNTY of VENTURA
COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Sevet Johnson, PsyD
County Executive Officer

Mike Pettit
Assistant County Executive Officer

Kaye Mand
County Chief Financial Officer

Shawn Atin
Assistant County Executive
Officer/
Human Resources Director
Labor Relations

September 12, 2023

Board of Supervisors
800 South Victoria Avenue
Ventura, CA 93009

SUBJECT: Approval of Responses to the 2022-2023 Ventura County Grand Jury Reports, Entitled “Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County” and “Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities” for Submittal to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that your Board consider and approve, with or without modification, the responses to the 2022-2023 Ventura County Grand Jury Reports, entitled “Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County” (Exhibit 5) and “Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities” (Exhibit 6) pertaining to County Government under your Board’s authority, for submittal to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in accordance with Penal Code section 933(c).

DISCUSSION:

Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05 require that your Board comment on Findings and Recommendations of the Grand Jury pertaining to County government under your authority.

Grand Jury Report – Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County

The 2022-23 Grand Jury issued a report dated June 12, 2023, entitled “Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County.” The Grand Jury required a response from your Board regarding findings one through ten, twelve through fourteen, and recommendations one through three and five through eight. The Grand Jury also required a response from the Ventura County Sheriff on finding eleven and recommendation four. The response for your Board was prepared by the Public Works Agency (PWA) and the County Executive Office for your approval and is attached as **Exhibit 1**. The Sheriff’s response is attached for reference as Exhibit 3.

The Grand Jury Report investigated current protocols and procedures utilized by 15 Ventura County public water purveyors to supply adequate water for wildland fire suppression. In their report, the Grand Jury put forth several recommendations to enhance the preparedness and response capabilities of water purveyors in emergency situations. The recommendations contained in the report encompass various aspects of emergency management. First, the report suggests water purveyors establish clear operational procedures and training programs to ensure an increased water supply for firefighting efforts during Fire Weather Watches (FWWs), Red Flag Warnings (RFWs), active fires, and Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS). Secondly, the Grand Jury emphasizes the importance of having on-site emergency power for critical water infrastructure, including SCADA systems. Additionally, they advocate for the establishment of standardized communication protocols with neighboring water purveyors to facilitate coordinated actions, such as water transfers during active fires.

The Grand Jury further recommended that water purveyors prioritize their employees' emergency communication capabilities by enrolling them in the FCC Wireless Priority Service (WPS) and the Government Emergency Telecommunications System (GETS), providing priority access to cellular and landline phones in times of crisis. To enhance inter-agency support, the Grand Jury suggested that water purveyors join the CalWARN network, which facilitates the sharing of emergency resources among water and wastewater agencies. Lastly, the Grand Jury advised all water purveyors to implement brush clearance around critical infrastructure, including water tanks, supply pumps, pump houses, and related facilities.

Contained within the Grand Jury Report were nine (9) recommended actions for water purveyors to implement to better prepare for, respond to, and mitigate the threat of wildfires and improve the availability of water during wildfires.

As noted in the prepared response to the Grand Jury Report, findings within the report generally identified inconsistencies with the level of procedures, emergency backup power, training, and preparedness across the water purveyors surveyed rather than specific deficiencies of an individual water purveyor, including PWA. As a result, PWA determined that all the recommendations of the Grand Jury, except for recommendation number six (enrollment in the Government Emergency Telecommunications System – GETS), are already in place at County operated water districts and meet the standard of the Grand Jury's Report as implemented. PWA plans to complete recommendation number six by December 2023.

Grand Jury Report – Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities

The 2022-23 Grand Jury also issued a report dated June 20, 2023, entitled "Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities." The report presents a series of recommendations aimed at enhancing the safety and well-being of detainees within the jail system, as well as improving communication and prevention measures.

Firstly, it advises the establishment, within six months of a review panel comprised of community members and independent experts. This panel's purpose would be to review

instances of jail deaths and provide support for initiatives focused on preventing such tragedies by the Ventura County Sheriff's Office (VCSO).

Another recommendation puts forth a collaboration between VCSO and Wellpath to develop and implement comprehensive in-service suicide prevention training for deputies, medical personnel, and other staff members. Within the same timeframe, the report calls for the refinement of communication protocols that monitor indicators of increased suicide risk or suicidal ideation among detainees.

The Grand Jury also emphasized involving families in suicide and self-harm prevention protocols. These protocol recommendations included installing Suicide Prevention Hotline Posters in visitor areas and adding hotline information to the beginning of each detained person's phone call. Additionally, the report highlights the need to incorporate suicide, self-harm, and overdose prevention resources into the VCSO's Inmate Orientation process.

Furthermore, the recommendations extend to evaluating the viability of incorporating passive-alert drug detection dogs in jail facilities and implementing a more comprehensive "See Something, Say Something" protocol, supported by continuous staff training and detainee orientation.

In terms of accountability and oversight, the report calls for regular reporting to the Board of Supervisors on key performance metrics, training implementation, and the progress of the suicide prevention program according to the terms of the Wellpath contract. Additionally, the VCSO is urged to align its intake procedures with the standards set by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC).

Lastly, the Grand Jury underscores the importance of transparency by suggesting that the VCSO establish a procedure to inform the public about circumstances surrounding jail deaths following independent reviews or MCU investigations.

At the conclusion of the report, the Grand Jury required a response from your Board regarding Finding eleven and Recommendations one, six and eight and a response from the Ventura County Sheriff on findings one through eleven and recommendations one through ten. The response for your Board was prepared by the County Executive Office for your consideration and is attached as **Exhibit 2**. The Sheriff's response is attached for reference as Exhibit 4.

As noted in the prepared response to the Grand Jury Report, your Board and the County are acutely aware of the weighty responsibility undertaken by the Sheriff's Department, as they provide for the care and safeguarding of over 1,300 individuals each day, amounting to more than 23,500 individuals annually.

Acknowledging the immense tragedy inherent in the loss of any life, the County's commitment remains steadfast in support of advancements in the safety and well-being of those in custody.

In this pursuit, the County emphasizes our duty to uphold the rights of individuals, encompassing crucial privacy and confidentiality protections essential for handling sensitive medical and legal information. Furthermore, we are grateful for the Sheriff's ongoing commitment to continuous improvement in the protection of lives under their care and we appreciate the Sheriff's commitment to furnish the Board of Supervisors and the public with regular reports, detailing performance and safety metrics, strides in training protocols, advancements in detention treatment programs, and suicide prevention efforts. This alignment underscores your Board's and this County's unwavering commitment to transparency and the principles of accountability.

In conclusion, we greatly value the Grand Jury's commitment to fostering improvement in the operations of public services.

This letter has been reviewed by the County Executive Office, County Counsel, and the Auditor-Controller's Office. If you have any questions, please contact Mike Pettit, Assistant County Executive Officer, at (805) 654-2720.

Sincerely,



Sevet Johnson, PsyD
County Executive Officer

Exhibit 1: Response to Grand Jury Report "Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County"

Exhibit 2: Response to Grand Jury Report "Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities"

Exhibit 3: Copy of Sheriffs Response to Grand Jury Report "Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County"

Exhibit 4: Copy of Sheriffs Response to Grand Jury Report "Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities"

Exhibit 5: Copy of Grand Jury Report "Water Availability for Wildfires in Ventura County"

Exhibit 6: Copy of Grand Jury Report "Deaths in Ventura County Detention and Jail Facilities"