

The Malibu Emergency Assessment Task Force Report

County Reviews Communications, Road Closures, Says Things Will Improve...

By Colin Penno

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The last serious brush fire in the Santa Monica Mountains took place on a scorching hot Saturday back in October 1982.

The October 9 Dayton Canyon/Paradise Cove blaze cut a trail of destruction clear across the Santa Monicas, leaving a 54,000 acre wasteland stretching from Canoga Park to the Pacific north of Malibu.

The fire also left an angry and vocal public charging authorities with a number of serious blunders in command and control—especially poor communications—which resulted in CHP and Sheriff-manned roadblocks in the wrong places at the wrong times.

In response, 4th District Supervisor Deane Dana proposed the creation of a county level task force to study the complaints. The Malibu Emergency Assessment Task Force was given the green light by the L.A. County Board of Supervisors October 19, 1982. In it, all county agencies involved in handling emergencies were instructed to report back by December of that year.

But government moves exceedingly slow, and the 38-page report arrived, by request, at the *Messenger* last week.

Reading it, one can easily see why. The report, conducted by County Chief Administrative Officer Harry Hufford's department, was tentatively completed by the early fall of '83; but according to some bureaucracy-watchers, was received with displeasure by the county because it did not paint the county's emergency machinery in good light.

L.A. County Fire Chief Clyde Bragdon Jr., for example, found the initial report "offensive," because it implied criticism of his department.

With the year's end fast approaching, Hufford and the agencies involved got together for a classic "soft shoe shuffle" in which the report was allegedly "watered down" via "status reports and reviews" of the report.

In a November 15, 1983 summary of reports turned in by the Sheriff's Department, the Fire Department, and others, the county's CAO observed that "Some issues remain that will require ongoing efforts by the public agencies and residents of the area before they are completely resolved in this disaster-prone area."

Hufford also observed that in an ongoing dialogue between the L.A. County Communications Department and the Federal Communications Commission, "A discussion of the need for public service agencies to communicate with each other on a special emergency frequency" is considered to be a "high priority."

Our public servants certainly earn their salaries.

The summary also stood behind the Fire Department's continuing responsibility to "request limited and/or full road closures when a fire or serious emergency occurs."

A continuing need exists, to "continue the policy of allowing people into an area when safe, in order to protect their property."

The department played down the idea that outside crews called in to fight major fires

an emergency."

Now that's good thinking.

"Direct telephone lines between Sheriff and Fire dispatching have been installed," although "Emergency Services Agencies are not able to communicate by radio with each other."

The Fire Department goes on to note that "The FCC has not approved the allocation of the required frequencies within the radio program to permit public safety agencies to communicate with each other."

This must come as a surprise to Joe Public, who can pick up his phone and, via satellite, talk directly with just about anyone 8000 miles away across the Atlantic.

In an obtuse memo from the County's Telecommunications Engineering and Maintenance branch, bureaucrats lament the difficulties inherent in radio links in the Santa Monicas, but note in their final sentence that "Alternate means, such as buying time on commercial broadcast stations be persued."

Again, advanced thinking.

With regard to the Sheriff's Department, the report notes that deputies in the field "Will update roadblock information more frequently," and discuss problems with the Fire Department "More often during emergencies."

A September 16 Sheriff's Department memo notes that "A general understanding of the (access) problem exists, but far less consensus as to the solution. Because of communications and command problems," the memo explains that "The Highway Patrol indicate it difficult (sic) to change their method of operation."

During the October 9 debacle, CHP officers refused ingress to Topanga from Pacific Coast Highway, and would not, as suggested, call in for updated information via radio, although the fire was miles away.

Meanwhile, traffic was pouring unimpeded into Topanga from the Valley.

And in response to a frantic call from the Topanga Town Council, a CHP dispatcher in Malibu said "You mean there are two roads through Topanga?"

In comparison to our neighbors in the metropolis, most Santa Monica Mountains' dwellers are intelligent, independent types who both value their freedom and appreciate the risks involved in the urban chaparral interface.

Freedom of movement is a most cherished tenet of this democratic society. If that freedom is to be temporarily denied citizens during fire and other emergencies, then it should be carried out in a much better fashion.

In summary, the *Messenger* feels that the long awaited Emergency Assessment Task Force Report does not bode well for intelligent action by the authorities during coming emergencies—at least, not for some time.

If anything, it emphasizes the unimaginative, flat-footed, and entrenched thinking inherent in local government.

The public deserves better service, (or better public servants) that this. ■