



2010-2011
Madera County Grand Jury
Final Report
Madera County Hazardous Material Response Team

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Introduction:

The Madera County Grand Jury visited Fire Station #19 located at 35141 Bonadelle Avenue on September 29, 2010, to conduct an investigation of the Hazardous Material Response Team (Hazmat) that has a special trailer on site.

The Grand Jury wanted to understand the operation and format of how the Hazmat Response Team responds to emergencies.

Findings:

Station #19 houses Madera County's Hazmat personnel and equipment that are called upon to respond, 24/7, to incidents involving the uncontrolled release of hazardous materials. The Grand Jury finds Station #19 is clean, well maintained, and staffed with exceptional people. The Hazmat truck and trailer were fully equipped with safety gear for the team, numerous educational devices, wireless internet, emergency guide book and a lab which was put on display for our inspection. The people who staff Station #19 are part of a group of Cal Fire employees from Madera, Mariposa, and Merced Counties who, along with staff from Environmental Health, form a team and through mutual aid agreements have established the Hazmat Response Plan for their areas. There is a similar group established in Merced County with specially trained personnel and equipment but no such group exists in Mariposa County.

The Grand Jury met with a group of six people: the Madera County Fire Chief, a Madera County Fire Captain, two Cal Fire Specialists, and two individuals from Environmental Health. Team members explained the process of dealing with a hazardous material spill and the role various agencies play in the process. A clear "Incident Command Authority/Responsibility" has been established for the area. The law enforcement agency with jurisdictional responsibility takes on the role of Incident Commander.

The Madera County Fire Department Hazmat Response Team provides the following services:

- Technical assistance and advice to the Incident Commander at incidents involving hazardous materials within Madera County and to others under mutual aid
- Personnel and specialized equipment at Hazmat incidents
- Sampling and assistance in the field identification of hazardous materials
- Tactical operations within the scope of the Hazmat Response Team capabilities and training to contain and mitigate Hazmat emergencies
- Assisting Environmental Health with the clean-up of minor spills
- Technical support for medical health considerations of first responders

A 911 call will normally initiate a response by the appropriate agency. When it has been determined that a release of hazardous material is involved, the Hazmat Response Team will be called. Appropriate personnel will be dispatched depending on the level of the incident.

When the incident involves an unknown substance classified as level 1, the Hazmat Response Team from Station #19 will be sent to the location. The spill is observed from a distance to determine its nature. Additional assistance is called as deemed appropriate.

In a Level 2 incident, which is considered a standard call, the station and the team members are paged to meet at the incident. A minimum of six Hazmat Response Team members are required if the team must enter an exclusion zone. An exclusion zone is the area around the spill for which protective gear is required. For complex operations, ten Hazmat Response Team members are required. The only exception to this policy is an immediate life threat.

The mission of the Hazmat Response Team is to control the spill and eliminate any imminent public hazard. The business or property owner is responsible for the clean-up and proper disposal of the hazardous material. Grant money is available to assist the responsible party in some circumstances. Responsible parties should consult with Environmental Health to determine if money is available when faced with a hazardous material clean-up.

The Grand Jury finds that county Hazmat incidents were low in 2010. During 2010 there were four chemical spills at gas stations, two chemical suicides, and a waste oil complaint. In 2003 there were 110 meth lab incidents which gave Madera County the dubious distinction of being the #1 county in the nation for this type of problem. Incidents involving meth labs have declined significantly. The Hazmat Response Team characterized their operation as low in number of incidents but high in public impact.

The staff of Station #19 require many hours of specialized training to achieve different levels of expertise. Training required to reach each level is expensive and funds are limited. Staff wishing to upgrade their skills by attending the required training are often required to pay for their training. Madera County has a small budget for training and there are also grants available to pay for some training opportunities. The cost of backfilling a position, however, makes many training opportunities cost prohibitive.

Different teams involved in Hazmat clean-up use different breathing apparatus. The cost of replacing the breathing equipment used by Station #19 would be around \$72,000, which would provide equipment that holds a larger supply of air and is interchangeable with that used by the Merced Hazmat team. Funds to replace this equipment are currently coming from uncertain Homeland Security grants. Safety suits cost about \$2,400 and expire after 5 years, used or not. These suits must also be replaced any time they fail to pass a required pressure test. The current tool budget for Station #19 is \$5,500. Twenty-seven hundred dollars is required to replace equipment that can no longer be used due to expiration.

The Grand Jury was supplied a Hazardous Material Area Plan and several draft copies of excerpts from what is to become the Madera-Mariposa-Merced Policy and Procedure Handbook. These excerpts deal with a variety of topics that guide critical components of the Hazmat Team's day-to-day operations. The Grand Jury finds that the Policy and Procedure Handbook in draft form indicates a lack of agreement and enforcement capability.

Conclusions:

The Grand Jury concludes that the highly motivated Hazmat Team is an asset to the community.

The Grand Jury concludes that training requirements to maintain the current level of expertise are extensive, and adequate staff to backfill for training is not being provided.

The Grand Jury concludes funding for Station #19 replacement of tools and equipment is uncertain.

The Grand Jury concludes that the policy and procedures handbook for Hazmat operations needs to be put in final form and distributed.

The Grand Jury concludes that Station #19 breathing equipment should be compatible with equipment used by other agencies.

Recommendations:

The Grand Jury recommends that the County establish and fund an additional position to relieve paid staff for training purposes.

The Grand Jury recommends that the County fully fund the cost of replacing equipment that expires.

The Grand Jury recommends that the County work with other mutual aid agencies to standardize the firefighter equipment.

The Grand Jury recommends the prompt completion, publication, and implementation of a policy and procedures handbook for the Madera-Mariposa-Merced Hazmat Response Team.

Respondent: Written response required pursuant to PC933 (c)

Madera County Board of Supervisors
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Respondents: Response Optional

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