

# **SAN DIEGO COUNTY EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER: SEEKING BETTER COMMUNICATION**

## ***SUMMARY***

Until the 2003 Firestorm, the San Diego County Emergency Operations Center had never been activated in order to respond to a fire emergency. As many agencies, communities and the media attempted to do all that they could do to help people affected by the fires, citizens faced frustration many times because they could not get the information they needed.

After reviewing the reports, other documents about the San Diego County Firestorm and interviews of people who were involved, the 2003-2004 San Diego County Grand Jury identified several significant areas that we believe required closer examination. The focus of this report is on the County's Emergency Operations Center and the communications and the flow of information into and out of the Center.

## ***PURPOSE***

Investigate the efficiency and effectiveness of the County's Emergency Operations Center's collection and dissemination of information to the public and other agencies during the 2003 Firestorm.

Identify and describe some of the problems that may have hindered the flow of information into and out of the Emergency Operations Center.

## ***PROCEDURES EMPLOYED***

### ***Site Visits and Tours***

- San Diego County Office of Emergency Services
- San Diego County Sheriff Communications Center
- KOGO Radio Station, Primary Emergency Alert System Station
- Health & Human Services County Alert Service System
- San Diego Regional Fire Prevention Emergency Preparedness Task Force Meetings

### ***Documents Reviewed***

- Unified San Diego County Emergency Services Organization Operational Area Emergency Plan, March 2000
- Public Safety Group Operational Plan Fiscal Years 2003-04 and 2004-05

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- San Diego County After Action Report Firestorm 2003, *Chief Administrative Office and Office of Emergency Services*
- *San Diego County After Action Report Firestorm 2003*, Office of the Sheriff
- *The 2003 San Diego County Fire Siege Fire Safety Review*, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, March 2, 2004
- Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission Report to the Governor, April 2004
- Southern California Firestorm 2003 Report, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

### **Interviews**

- Officials associated with Emergency Alert System
- San Diego City Fire and Rescue 911 Commander
- Public Information Officer County of San Diego
- Public Information Officer San Diego Police Department
- Officials of California Department of Forestry

### **Website Information**

- San Diego County RACES - Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services ([www.sdsheriff.net](http://www.sdsheriff.net))
- Office of Emergency Services ([www.sdcounty.ca.gov/oes](http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/oes))
- Office of the Sheriff ([www.sdsheriff.net](http://www.sdsheriff.net))
- Cleveland National Forest (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/cleveland/>)

## ***DISCUSSION***

On Sunday October 26, 2003, residents in San Diego awoke to a darkened ash-filled sky. Many started their day with their morning cup of coffee in hand, scanning the Sunday newspaper for news about the fires raging across Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties.

The weather warnings had been in the news for days - red flag alert, single digit humidity with high Santa Ana winds. The evidence of damage that could result from a tiny flicker of fire was now front-page news – fires so hot that windows melted and so fierce that they were called “firestorms.”

Few San Diegans knew when the sun rose that Sunday morning, that the dark thick clouds of smoke had not blown south from our neighbor's fires or the Roblar fire located at Camp Pendleton Marine Base. It was smoke from San Diego County's own firestorm that began its unprecedented race during the darkness of night, a time period when fires normally remain docile.

Within hours after the first flames of the Cedar fire, at approximately 5:30 p.m. Saturday October 25th, the Paradise fire was reported at 1:32 Sunday morning. By mid-day Sunday, the Otay fire crossed the border into the U.S. At 11:30 Monday morning, October 27th the Bonsall fire was reported. By the time the firestorm was declared ended, 376,237 acres or 13% of San Diego County's total land mass had burned. When finally suppressed, 16 people had lost their lives and 3,241 structures were destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

More than 3 official agency and Task Force evaluative reports have already been published about the San Diego Firestorm.<sup>2</sup> Still to come are significant findings and recommendations from the San Diego Regional Fire Prevention Emergency Preparedness Task Force, a group established jointly by the City of San Diego and the County. Led by Co-Chairs County Sheriff Bill Kolender and San Diego City Fire and Rescue Chief Jeff Bowman, the Task Force will issue findings and recommendations to their respective agencies this summer.

## **THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO'S EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER**

### ***DISCUSSION***

When there are significant emergencies occurring or anticipated to occur in the San Diego County, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated. The purpose of the Center is to provide centralized emergency management where priorities are established; policy decisions are made; long term planning is carried out and information flow and resource requests are coordinated.<sup>3</sup> The Director of the San Diego County Office of Emergency Services is responsible for activating the EOC.

Activation of the EOC is governed by a document titled, "Unified San Diego County Emergency Services Organization Operational Area Emergency Plan, March 2000." The

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<sup>1</sup> *The 2003 San Diego County Fire Siege Fire Safety Review*, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, March 2004

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*; *Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission Report to the Governor, April 2004*; *Southern California Firestorm 2003 Report, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center*

<sup>3</sup> San Diego County After Action Report Firestorm 2003

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extensive document, which has been approved by the County Board of Supervisors, contains detailed duties and obligations of all resource agencies and representatives who are essential and necessary for responding to emergencies. Upon activation, representatives listed on the EOC Organizational Chart (*APPENDIX A*) assemble in one room at the EOC, each at a workstation that has a computer and telephone. Typically, each county department or agency called on to serve at the EOC, simultaneously activates an internal Department Operations Center (DOC) so that agency-wide support can be offered to the representative to the County EOC.

The San Diego EOC had never been activated for an event of this scope or an event that has impacted this many people or so many governmental jurisdictions and on such a vast geographic scale. Nor had it been activated before in order to respond to wildfires. Other than practices or exercises, the Center had only opened as a precaution for events such as Y2K, the Republican National Convention or the Super Bowl.

The County EOC was activated at approximately 5:20 a.m. on Sunday, October 26<sup>th</sup> as a result of receiving notification from the Sheriff's DOC about the firestorm. EOC's activation began more than five hours after the first evacuations in the San Diego Country Estates and four hours after the start of the North County Paradise fire at 1:30 a.m.

## **IMPROVING & ENHANCING COMMUNICATION FROM AGENCIES INTO EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER**

### ***DISCUSSION***

Virtually every "after-action report" or analysis of the 2003 Firestorm by emergency, public safety, fire officials or other emergency responders cites the significant problems that resulted from the lack of intelligence and current information regarding the behavior of the firestorm.

From its onset, the Cedar fire defied predictions. As darkness fell, predictions were for its spread to be limited within Cleveland National Forest boundaries during the night. By midnight, unexpected high winds set the fire on course towards San Diego Country Estates, east of Ramona. By daybreak, it had cut a swath south through Mussey Grade, Wildcat Canyon Road, and Barona Indian Reservation to parts of Lakeside.

Low humidity, high winds and unlimited fuel set the stage for fast paced expansion of the Paradise, Cedar, Otay and later the Bonsall Fires. To make matters worse, each fire created its own "weather pattern" of even higher winds and temperatures. The fires had many fronts. The fires expanded in far too many directions at one time and the winds shot embers miles ahead of the main fire fronts. Smoke and ash severely reduced visibility and prevented intelligence gathering by air.

The "eyes and ears" for the Emergency Operations Center were officials who were "on the ground" fighting the fire and effecting the evacuations. Dispatch logs from Sheriff's

communications revealed the speed at which deputies and fire and rescue workers had to work as they attempted to save lives and property. There was no time for advanced warnings so that residents could have time to prepare for evacuations. Barona Fire Fighters received notice only twenty minutes before the fire shot through their area.

Without similar logs from State and local fire and rescue officials, we cannot trace or describe the course of events during those crucial hours. A Unified Command for fighting the fire was established when the fire crossed out of Cleveland National Forest land into land for which the California Department of Forestry (CDF) is responsible. Through this command leadership, fire agency resources were dispatched to respond to what must have seemed like fires that could never be controlled or ended.

Lines of communication were not established to the County Emergency Operations Center from the fire and rescue field activities so that others could know what was happening. Consistently, every “after-action report” cited difficulties because of a lack of intelligence about the behavior of the fires. Predictions on fire behavior and fire fighting strategies were not being transmitted to EOC officials so that they could use that information and offer assistance to people in the field or share information with the public.

When asked how this communication was expected to occur, officials pointed to the Unified San Diego County Emergency Services Organization Operational Area Emergency Plan. The plan defines a process where fire and rescue information during an emergency comes into the EOC through a liaison or designated representative. The liaison is elected periodically by representatives from all fire agencies and is called the Fire and Rescue Coordinator.

Coincidentally, the Fire and Rescue Coordinator was the person in CDF who was heading up the Unified Command for the entire fire. He could not perform the EOC function except briefly the second and third days of the fire. Periodically, others filled the seat, including the OES Fire Service Coordinator and other fire agency representatives.

Interviews and reports reveal another aspect of this problem. Getting fire intelligence information into the EOC would not have happened instantaneously by having the elected Fire and Rescue Coordinator sitting at the EOC table. What fire agencies were facing was unprecedented. The multiplicity of fire agencies was also unprecedented. The need for protocols and guidelines for governing working relationships among fire agencies has never been more apparent.

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There are two important recommendations from the CDF and USFS San Diego County Fire Siege report<sup>4</sup> that we endorse:

1. All agencies involved should provide a standing representative to the County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during major wildland fires that affect multiple jurisdictions.
2. Create a local Multi Agency Coordination (MAC) Group for San Diego County, established by the Office of Emergency Services Fire and Rescue Coordinator. The MAC group would represent all departments and agencies with fires burning within their jurisdictions, Operational plans would establish triggers for activation of MAC based on fire activity.

### ***FACTS AND FINDINGS***

**Fact:** Emergency, public safety, fire officials and other emergency responders and agencies faced significant problems that resulted from the lack of intelligence and current information regarding the behavior of the firestorm.

**Finding:** The fires defied predictions and had many fronts. Smoke and ash severely reduced visibility and prevented intelligence gathering by air. For these reasons getting current information was very difficult and at times impossible.

**Fact:** In many cases, the “eyes and ears” for the Emergency Operations Center were officials who were “on the ground” fighting the fire and effecting the evacuations.

**Fact:** During an emergency, information from field fire and rescue teams comes into the EOC through a liaison or designated representative. The liaison is elected periodically by representatives from all fire agencies and is called the Fire and Rescue Coordinator

**Finding:** Coincidentally, the Fire and Rescue Coordinator was the person in CDF who was heading up the Unified Command for the entire fire so he could not perform EOC function except briefly the second and third days of the fire. Periodically, others filled the seat.

**Finding:** Getting fire intelligence information into the EOC would not have happened instantaneously by having the elected Fire and Rescue Coordinator sitting at the EOC table. Protocols and guidelines for governing working relationships and communications linkages among fire agencies are not established and need to be before this type of situation reoccurs.

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<sup>4</sup> *The 2003 San Diego County Fire Siege Fire Safety Review*, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, March 2004; Pg. 41

**Finding:** The CDF and USFS San Diego County Fire Siege report contains two recommendations for fire agency representation and preparation that we believe can solve these problems.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

**The Grand Jury recommends that the San Diego County Board of Supervisors:**

- 04-08-1** Ensure that the Office of Emergency Services initiates necessary action for implementation of the two recommendations we have endorsed from the CDF and USFS The 2003 San Diego County Fire Siege Fire Safety Review Report.
- 04-08-2** Ensure that the Office of Emergency Services works with other fire agencies to develop and provide training programs that are necessary for the successful implementation of these new strategies.

## **OFFICE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES OBLIGATION TO WARN THE PUBLIC OF IMMINENT DANGER**

### ***DISCUSSION***

In the aftermath of the San Diego Firestorm, a frequently asked question was, “Why wasn’t the Emergency Alert System (EAS) used to warn the public?”

Answers to this question come from different perspectives. One perspective looks at the purpose of the EAS and emphasizes how the Federal Government established this warning system when our nation was at risk for nuclear attacks. The rules and procedures that must be followed in order to activate the system were established many years ago. Specific equipment must be used to transmit messages to local radio, television and cable networks. The messages can be no longer than one minute and thirty seconds. Only the Office of Emergency Services, U. S. Weather Service and the Sheriff are authorized send the messages. Messages are sent to KOGO radio station and instantly transmitted to other stations when KOGO broadcasts the message. The various media outlets can choose whether or not to broadcast the alert. Some stations have equipment that automatically transmits the message. Others do not.

As noted earlier, the fire was ravaging areas far faster than anyone could imagine. People often had little time to flee its path. Fire and public safety personnel were doing all they could as quickly as they could to stay ahead and warn people about evacuations. Their work was in remote, rural and mountainous areas that frequently had only one road in or out.

Officials cited how the Emergency Alert System was not a tool for the job that needed to be done during these early hours. They made an informed decision not to activate the

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EAS because of its limited capacity for information and time constraints for changing messages. A blanket alert for such large areas could have resulted in massive traffic tie-ups if huge numbers of people tried to evacuate all at the same time. Without the ability to give much more precise information, people might have actually evacuated into the path of danger rather than escaping to safety.

Instead, officials point out how the door-to-door, loudspeaker messages or alerts from the Sheriff's ASTREA helicopters were found to be the best methods to use for meeting these unique needs. They also note that if the EAS was used, not only were there few people listening to stations during those hours, but only one radio station has staff available 24-hours a day to receive and transmit information.

Still the question about why the Emergency Alert System was not used, remains unanswered for the remaining crucial hours of the firestorms, to warn people about the widespread evacuations and especially about the movement of fire, rescue, medical, utility and other personnel into areas where they needed to go. The EAS was used only once during the firestorm and that alert was sent by the U.S. Weather Service. KOGO Radio broadcast the alert at 2:06 p.m. on Sunday October 26th, fourteen hours after the first evacuations.

Would earlier warning broadcasts have helped people better prepare and more safely evacuate from Poway, Crest, Shadow Mountain, Scripps Ranch, Granite Hills, Clairemont or other areas? Would broadcast warnings have been effective in telling people to avoid going into areas where fire and public safety people needed priority access? While the answers are speculative, the questions must be asked and thoughtfully answered as officials review and evaluate all the lessons learned about the 2003 Firestorm.

We believe that the most important lesson learned from the 2003 Firestorm is how our dedicated public safety, fire, rescue and medical personnel, who face unimaginable challenges during emergencies, need as many tools as possible so they can save lives and property. What is important is a commitment to understand and meet those needs and to ensure other agencies and alert methods, like "Reverse 911" (automated mass calling system) that is already being implemented, are available to them the next time.

### ***FACTS AND FINDINGS***

**Fact:** The Federal Government established the Emergency Alert System when our nation was at risk for nuclear attacks. There are specific rules and procedures that must be followed in order to activate the system.

**Finding:** Officials made an informed decision not to activate the EAS because of its limited capacity for information and time constraints for changing messages. Without the ability to give more precise information, people might have actually evacuated into the path of danger rather than escaping to safety.



**Fact:** The EAS was used only once during the firestorm and that alert was sent by the U.S. Weather Service. KOGO Radio broadcast the alert at 2:06 p.m. on Sunday October 26<sup>th</sup>, fourteen hours after the first evacuations.

**Finding:** The most important lesson learned from the 2003 Firestorm is how our dedicated public safety, fire, rescue and medical personnel, who face unimaginable challenges during emergencies, need as many tools as possible so they can save lives and property.

**Finding:** The Emergency Alert System, as it now operates, has severe limitations in its usefulness. Other means of mass communications of warnings, like the “reverse 911,” must be explored.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

**The Grand Jury recommends that the San Diego County Board of Supervisors:**

**04-08-3** Evaluate the obligation to warn the public regarding impending dangers and identify what strategies, in addition to the “reverse 911,” would be effective and efficient tools that can be used during times of emergencies.

**04-08-4** Ensure that public education campaigns are conducted regarding these new strategies.

## **OBLIGATION TO KEEP THE PUBLIC INFORMED AND UPDATED ABOUT EMERGENCIES**

### ***DISCUSSION***

Because of the magnitude of the challenges officials faced in dispatching resources to fight the fires and respond to the devastation the fires caused, their attention could not also be focused on another problem that emerged during the 2003 Firestorm. That problem was a public that wanted and needed accurate and timely information about the fire.

While information and intelligence for first responders was scarce, information for the general public was even scarcer. A note in the County’s “after-action report” commented that County Emergency staff found the best and most current information available was from local broadcast stations. Yet, the broadcasters noted that they expected to get their information from the County’s emergency officials.

Our examination revealed that there were few internal mechanisms in place for the Emergency Operations Center to gather and disseminate current and accurate information to the public. Information regarding paths of the fire, evacuations, road closures, contamination of water supplies, safety information when returning to areas and other

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critical public notices were available at limited times. The Board of Supervisors Chair, the Sheriff and others held periodic news conferences. One telephone line had a recorded message updated once a day. The County Public Information Officer issued press releases, none of which covered any of these topics. Through interviews we learned that some information was made available on a website, including a list of road closures from the County Public Works Department.

We learned that the Public Information Officer (PIO) for the Sheriff worked diligently to transmit information to the media outlets regarding evacuations and other public safety issues throughout the Firestorm. Out of the frustration of those first hours when the crisis was imminent and media outlets were unavailable, has emerged an excellent program called the “Major Incident Alert System.” Established by the PIO’s from government agencies and media representatives, the telephone “call-out” system uses a San Diego Police Department server to notify all media regarding public safety emergency information on a 24-hour basis.

A consistent recommendation that we learned from reports<sup>5</sup> and interviews with media was one for the formation of a Joint Information Center adjacent to the County’s Emergency Operations Center. The Fire Siege report contains an equally important recommendation for the development of a Media Communications Operating Plan.<sup>6</sup>

We concur with both of these recommendations. Through the development of a Media Communications Operating Plan, County Emergency officials can not only identify the additional information sources or mechanisms needed, but can also establish formal protocols and working agreements with those agencies or contacts. If a Joint Information Center is located adjacent to the County’s Emergency Operations Center, the transfer of the current and timely information to the public could be immediate.

During our investigation we found and were very impressed with another public information function that has been implemented by the San Diego Police Department. When the City’s Emergency Operations Center is activated, they make information available to residents through telephones answered by volunteers. The system publicizes one telephone number that is answered by a group of informed volunteers. We urge consideration of this additional service, which would go far in fulfilling the goal of keeping the public informed.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Governor’s Blue Ribbon Fire Commission Report to the Governor, April 2004 Pg. 77; The 2003 San Diego County Fire Siege Fire Safety Review California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, March 2004, Pg. 54*

<sup>6</sup> *The 2003 San Diego County Fire Siege Fire Safety Review California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, March 2004, Pg. 54*

## ***FACTS AND FINDINGS***

**Fact:** County Emergency staff noted that the best and most current information available about the fire came from local broadcast stations. The broadcasters noted that they expected to get their information from the County's emergency officials.

**Finding:** There were few internal mechanisms in place for the Emergency Operations Center to gather and disseminate current and accurate information to the public.

**Fact:** The Public Information Officer (PIO) for the Sheriff worked diligently to transmit information to the media outlets regarding evacuations and other public safety issues to all media outlets throughout the Firestorm

**Fact:** PIOs from government agencies and media representatives have established a "Major Incident Alert System." It is a telephone "call-out" system for notifying all media regarding public safety emergency information on a 24-hour basis.

**Finding:** A consistent recommendation that we heard from reports and interviews with media was one for the formation of a Joint Information Center adjacent to the County's Emergency Operations Center.

**Fact:** OES only made available one telephone line with a recorded message updated once a day for the public to call for information.

**Fact:** During major emergencies, the San Diego Police Department ensures that information is made available to the public through telephones answered by volunteers.

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

### **The Grand Jury Recommends that the San Diego County Board of Supervisors:**

- 04-08-5** Direct County Emergency Officials to develop a Media Communications Operating Plan with consultation and concurrence of all stakeholders, agencies and organizations that are put into action when the Emergency Operations Center is activated.
- 04-08-6** Investigate, plan and implement the development of a Joint Information Center adjacent to the EOC operation where media representatives can assemble to receive and transmit information during emergencies.
- 04-08-7** Investigate and implement the development of a centralized public information telephone program where the public can call to receive accurate, complete and timely information from trained volunteers.

## ***COMMENDATIONS***

The San Diego County Grand Jury commends dedicated public safety, fire, rescue and medical personnel who despite unimaginable challenges during the 2003 Firestorm, time and again protected communities, saved lives and fought to preserve property, frequently at the risk of their own lives.

The San Diego County Grand Jury commends the men and women who worked tirelessly in the Emergency Centers, community shelters and programs, in rescuing and transporting animals and countless other ways to help the victims of the 2003 San Diego County Firestorm.

The San Diego County Grand Jury commends the San Diego Fire Chief's Association, the Burn Institute and the Firemen's Fund for the contribution they have made to all San Diego county residents by publishing *Living With Wildfire, A Guide For The Homeowner* as a supplement to the San Diego Union Tribune on Sunday April 25, 2004.

## ***REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS***

The California Penal Code §933 (c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
  - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding.
  - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
  - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
  - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
  - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an

explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.

- (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required by the date indicated:

<b><u>RESPONDING AGENCY</u></b>	<b><u>RECOMMENDATIONS</u></b>	<b><u>DATE</u></b>
<b>San Diego County Board of Supervisors</b>	<b>04-08-1 through 04-08-7</b>	<b>08/26/04</b>

**APPENDIX A**

