

SECTION I: UNIT OVERVIEW

UNIT DESCRIPTION

Mendocino County is located in California's north coast region, bounded by the Pacific Ocean to the west, Sonoma County to the south, Lake County to the southeast and east, Glenn and Tehama Counties to the east and northeast, Trinity County to the north and east, and Humboldt County to the north. The borders with Glenn and Tehama Counties are completely within the Mendocino National Forest in the county's northeastern portion.

Within an area of 3,510 square miles, Mendocino County's elevation runs from sea level at the ocean to 6,954 feet atop Anthony Peak, near the Tehama County border. Inland from 129 miles of magnificent coastline, the environment is as varied as the terrain. World-class vineyards thrive in the southern valleys, and stands of redwood and Douglas-fir trees tower down from the Pacific Coast Range. Numerous mountain peaks over 6,000 feet grace the northeastern portion of the county and bear snow caps until early summer. Oak woodlands on rolling hills are scattered throughout the county.

The county is characterized by steep slopes, with the main ridges oriented north-northwest to south-southeast. Rivers and streams are abundant, some flowing year round and others drying up in the summer. The mighty Eel River drains to the north and the Russian River to the south. Rivers west of the first divide inland from the coast, just west of the Highway 101 corridor, drain basically east to west, to the ocean. These include, from south to north, the Gualala River North Fork, plus the Garcia, Navarro, Albion, Big, Noyo, and Ten Mile Rivers.

The county's mountains and hills are interspersed with nine distinct valleys:

- Potter Valley in the east-central portion
- Round Valley to the northeast, with Covelo in its center
- Leggett Valley in the north, with the communities of Leggett and Piercy
- Long Valley south of Leggett, with Laytonville at its center
- Little Lake Valley in the county's center, surrounding the City of Willits
- Redwood Valley, just north of the Ukiah Valley
- Ukiah Valley in the south-central area, with the City of Ukiah at its center
- Anderson Valley in the central-western portion, including the towns of Yorkville, Boonville, Philo, and Navarro
- Sanel Valley in the south, with the community of Hopland

The population of Mendocino County is currently estimated at approximately 88,000, with an overall density of approximately 25 persons per square mile. The majority of residents live in and around the valleys along Highway 101, which winds through the county from south-southeast to the north-northwest for 106 miles. Other population centers include the dozen or so communities along Highway 1, which travels the coast from the county's south end until it turns inland about 30 miles north of Fort Bragg and joins Highway 101 at Leggett. These towns are, from south to north, Gualala, Anchor Bay, Point Arena, Manchester, Irish Beach, Elk, Albion, Little River, Mendocino, Caspar, Fort Bragg, Cleone, Westport, and Rockport.

The county includes only four incorporated cities: Ukiah, Willits, Fort Bragg, and Point Arena. The rest of the county's local governments are special districts of various kinds, including community service districts, fire districts, water districts, and others established to provide specific services.

Wildland subdivisions and continuous areas of Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) are predominant around the population centers, and these are likely to increase in size and number. Recent and upcoming improvements on Highway 101 make Mendocino County more and more attractive to persons desiring a rural lifestyle while commuting to work in Santa Rosa and even the San Francisco Bay Area.

One of the county's largest employers is agriculture, especially considering the trickle-down effect on other businesses dependent on agriculture. Commercial fishing is important to the coastal communities, especially Fort Bragg. Cottage industries, tourism, and recreation, along with the timber industry, round out the commercial character of the county. Light and heavy industry is in place, but inroads have been slow due to space, transportation, and environmental concerns. Governmental and nonprofit organizations are also large employers. Ukiah, the county seat, offers hundreds of jobs relative to government and public services, contains the county's largest concentration of medical and legal services, and hosts an ever-increasing number of large retail stores, motels and hotels, and restaurants.

Land use in Mendocino County includes agriculture (predominantly wine grapes and pears), timber production (Douglas-fir, coast redwood, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, and hardwoods), livestock production, and recreation. Cultivation of marijuana, either illegally or now legally (due to the compassionate use proposition (Prop 215)) for medical purposes, is prevalent throughout the county and contributes to the local economy. It at times presents a hindrance to fire safety efforts, due to the growers' desires to conceal their locations.

Mendocino County enjoys a Mediterranean climate, with dry summers during which typically no rain falls from early June to late October. The weather can vary greatly on the same day in different parts of the county. An average summer day may find the coastal areas at 60 degrees and inland temperatures at 90 to 105 degrees Fahrenheit. The warmer the Sacramento Valley becomes, the deeper fog intrudes from the ocean up the coastal drainages, and the windier the inland valleys become. Diverse microclimates benefit from having four seasons and 40 to 100 inches of annual rainfall, depending on the location, elevation, and weather patterns. The declared fire season in Mendocino County typically lasts from early June to mid or late October.

Vegetative fuel types in the county consist of grass, oak woodlands, brush, mixed chaparral, timber, and to a lesser extent, cut-over slash. Few areas of Mendocino County have not been harvested for timber in the past. Brush is usually composed of chamise on the south and west facing slopes and mixed chaparral on the north and east facing slopes. Mendocino County has seen very few large wildfires in the past several decades, resulting in a massive build-up of wildland fuels ready to burn.

UNIT PREPAREDNESS AND FIREFIGHTING CAPABILITIES

WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION RESOURCES

The Unit is geographically divided into six battalions. Suppression resources during fire season include approximately 125 career personnel and approximately another 120 seasonal personnel, on duty around the clock, staffing 10 fire stations, 16 engines, 4 bulldozers, and other equipment. A typical engine company consists of one Captain or Fire Apparatus Engineer and two or three firefighters. In addition, ten 15-man California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation crews, housed at Chamberlain Creek and Parlin Fork Conservation Camps in Jackson Demonstration State Forest, provide hand line construction, mop-up, post-fire patrols, and assist with fire line suppression repair.

The Helitack Base located at Howard Forest is the home of Copter 101, a Bell UH-1H “Super Huey” which serves multiple purposes, primary initial attack on wildfires. Copter 101 carries a pilot, two captains, 5-6 firefighters, and a 324-gallon collapsible Bambi bucket. Full deployment of the helicopter involves dropping off one captain and the firefighters at the fire scene, attaching the bucket for dipping from the nearest accessible water supply, applying water to the fire.

The Unit is home to the Ukiah Air Attack Base which provides 7-day coverage during the daylight hours of fire season. Tankers 90 and 91 are Grumman S2T turboprop air tankers, each with a capacity of 1,200 gallons of fire retardant. Air Attack 110, the Unit’s North American Rockwell turboprop OV-10 Bronco command plane, carries a pilot and the Air Tactical Group Supervisor who is responsible for air space coordination and aerial fire suppression activities from an orbit above the fire. The base, located inland in the hot and dry Ukiah Valley, has the advantage of rarely being impacted by fog, unlike its neighboring bases in Rohnerville and Santa Rosa, which are quite subject to coastal weather influences.

All Unit aircraft provide rapid initial attack and are especially valuable in the county’s remote areas where steep terrain and narrow, winding roads greatly increase ground response times. In such situations, aircraft are often at scene and applying water or retardant before engines and dozers arrive, cooling the fire and giving ground resources a needed boost. Aircraft also provide “eyes in the sky” for those on the ground, noting spot fires and giving other direction from their vantage point. Additional eyes are provided by the Mendocino County Cooperative Aerial Fire Patrol during fire season. Since 1950, the COOP Air Patrol has supplied a small aircraft to fly over the county to look for undetected fires by spotting smokes. CAL FIRE works very closely with the Patrol and provides direction to its pilot.

CAL FIRE dispatch levels during fire season are affected primarily by weather conditions. During a period of high dispatch, any fire in, or threatening, wildland vegetation causes immediate dispatch of two Battalion Chiefs, the command aircraft, both air tankers, one helicopter, five engines, two dozers, and two hand crews. Local fire department resources respond according to their locations, frequently assisting each other across district boundaries.

LOCAL FIRE DEPARTMENTS:

Mendocino County owes very much to its local fire agencies, many of which are staffed completely by volunteers and whose personnel are often the first to arrive at wildland fires and other emergencies. Most of these agencies are in Fire Protection Districts (FPDs) or Community Services Districts (CSDs) which are governed by elected boards of directors and have authority to levy taxes to support their work.

The Local Departments Map (located within the Exhibits Section), shows the locations and boundaries of these districts. Areas adjacent to a district but not included in it are referred to as the agency's "sphere of influence." Although they pay no taxes or fees, people in these areas still receive services, because the county's emergency responders never refuse to help someone in need. However, such situations can become very frustrating to cash-strapped departments and can be a source of irritation to those who pay their share for emergency services. Most departments supplement their tax base income with at least one major fundraiser a year – usually barbeques with live music, which are well-supported, extremely popular social events.

Fires in wildlands, structures, vehicles, dumpsters, and similar situations account for only 10% to 20% of the calls to which local agencies respond. Medical aid calls are by far the majority – an average of 80% for most departments – followed by traffic accidents and other rescue situations. Consequently, county firefighters undergo training in medical response, extricating patients from vehicles, responding to hazardous materials ("haz mat") incidents, and a variety of other emergency skills – thus the common term "Fire-Rescue." A high percentage of volunteers are First Responders or Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), both of which require significant training. Fire departments on the coast are often called to assist in cliff rescues and other water-related emergencies and have equipment and volunteers to meet that need.

Firefighter training or "drill" in most of the county's departments involves one night a week plus additional trainings on weekends. Firefighters often train with other departments, especially on training burns, in which abandoned buildings or wildland fields are burned for training purposes. Some firefighters travel out of county to obtain training and certification in specialized fields. In addition, trainings are brought into the county.

Mendocino County has an extraordinarily strong and effective mutual aid system, among all agencies and for all types of emergency response. Local fire departments are quick to assist each other and CAL FIRE, and vice versa, most often within the Mutual Aid Zones, but beyond those as needed. On wildfires, CAL FIRE and local firefighters, paid and volunteer, work side by side as equals, all in yellow Nomex fire resistant clothing and barely distinguishable from each other in appearance and skill. On medical aid calls, local fire departments, local ambulance services, CAL FIRE, and CALSTAR or REACH emergency transport helicopters all work as one team.

A description of each of Mendocino County's local fire agencies follows, listed in alphabetical order. Data and comments were provided primarily by each Departments respective Chief. Insurance Service Office (ISO) ratings are assigned to localities by the insurance industry according to their fire suppression capabilities, available water supply, and other factors, with a rating of 1 indicating the best possible situation. Homeowners' fire insurance costs are calculated in part according to these ratings.

ALBION-LITTLE RIVER FIRE DEPARTMENT is a nonprofit corporation operating in conjunction with the Albion-Little River Fire Protection District. The district, which has no paid staff, includes 44 square miles on the central coast and protects 3000 permanent residents and typically another 3000 visitors annually. They respond to approximately 200 calls a year. The District's ISO Insurance ratings are 8 and 7, and its personnel work diligently to maintain them.

Response to wildfires is extremely aggressive -- and must be -- because the closest CAL FIRE resource is outside the district, at the Woodlands Station. The department is proud of their record of keeping wildfires small pending the arrival of other resources, and greatly needs funding and equipment to continue providing this response. Areas of concern regarding wildfire and other safety issues include Paul Dimmick State Park, the Navarro Headlands, and The Woods, a retirement community bordering Van Damme State Park. The department may be contacted at (707) 937-0888.

ANDERSON VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT is part of a Community Services District. The District covers 200 square miles and 4000 residents, and responds to about 300 calls per year. Many responses are outside the district and unreimbursed. ISO ratings are 5 in downtown Boonville and 8 in most of the rest of the district.

Wildland Urban Interface areas (WUIs) of special concern include Rancho Navarro and Holmes, Sky, Yorkville, and Nash Ranches. The department may be reached at (707) 895-2020.

BROOKTRAILS FIRE DEPARTMENT is part of the Brooktrails Township Community Services District and protects improvements in the Brooktrails Township, Sylvandale, and Spring Creek subdivisions. The entire 7,773 acre forested development contains approximately 1,600 dwellings, and an estimated 6000 residents. The Fire Chief, a Battalion Chief, and a part-time office assistant are the only paid personnel. Insurance Service Office (ISO) ratings are 5 within the district and 9 outside; the rating of 5 is due to the abundance of water and an excellent system of fire hydrants.

One of the department's valued members is Ashes the Arson Dog, who is one of only 100 dogs in the United States certified by the Canine Academy Training Center to the level that evidence from his work is admissible in court. The department may be reached at (707) 459-4441 or firedept@btcsd.org.

COMPTCHE VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT is a small tax district of 50 square miles and 600 residents located fourteen miles inland of the town of Mendocino. An additional 100 residents in the sphere of influence receive round-the-clock services free of charge. Equipment includes four engines, two water tenders, one rescue, and one utility vehicle at one station. The District's ISO rating is an 8.

Comptche faces two situations common to most departments in the county's rural areas. 1) Most volunteers work in towns outside the district, causing a need for more volunteers available during the week. 2) Increasing regulations and costs are a burden on the department and make the job of volunteer firefighters a difficult one. But they continue to serve their community. The department may be contacted at (707) 937-0728 or comptchefire@pacific.net.

COVELO FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT, serves 50 square miles and 3200 residents in the Round Valley area, near the Mendocino National Forest. An ambulance service is part of the district, whose medical response area extends from the Dos Rios on Highway 162, to the Tehama

County line, to the Trinity County line, and to the top of Forest Highway 7 in the Mendocino National Forest. More than 600 Round Valley residents are CALSTAR/REACH subscribers. The nonprofit CALSTAR and REACH provide critical service to this and other remote areas from which ground transport would take much more time to transport persons in critical need of hospital care. The District's ISO rating is 9 for businesses and 8 for residential areas. The department may be reached at (707) 983-6719 or covelofire@pacific.net.

ELK VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT is located on the coast near the intersection of Highway 1 and the Philo-Greenwood Road. Many volunteers work in towns outside the district, so the need is great for more persons available during the week. The ambulance successfully bills only about 5 transports a year, and reimbursement for providing mutual aid is rare. The District includes two state parks and much difficult terrain. The department recently successfully retained their ISO ratings of 7 in the town of Elk and 9 in the outlying areas. The department may be contacted at may be reached at (707) 877-3558 or elkfire@mcn.org.

FORT BRAGG FIRE DEPARTMENT operates under a Joint Powers Agreement between the City of Fort Bragg and the surrounding Fire District. The department serves 75 square miles and approximately 15,000 residents. State parks and beaches in the response area are occasionally the site of cliff rescues. Several areas surrounding the city border on heavy timberlands. ISO ratings are 3 in the City, 4 in the district (areas within 5 miles of a station), and 8 to 10 in the rural areas outside of 5 miles. The department may be contacted at (707) 961-2831 or fbfd8300@yahoo.com.

HOPLAND FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT serves 3000 residents across 110 square miles. Personnel respond from two locations: the main station located at the southwest edge of Hopland on Feliz Creek Road and the North Station located several miles north of Hopland on Highway 101, just south of Retech. ISO ratings are 7 within the community of Hopland itself and 8 in the rural areas. Areas of special concern regarding wildfires are McNab Ranch, the Hopland Indian Rancheria and Russian River Estates in the wildland urban-interface. The department's major needs are additional funding and more volunteers available during daytime hours. The department may be contacted at (707) 744-1222 or chief@hoplandfire.org. Additional information about the department may be found at their website www.hoplandfire.org.

LEGGETT VALLEY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT is located in the county's north-northwestern corner, where Highway 101 and Highway 1 converge. Lack of funding is a major concern. The county contributes \$18,000 a year, but the district's tax base is very small. The area's ISO rating is 9. The department may be reached at leggettfire@gmail.com.

LITTLE LAKE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT is located in the center of the County, serves both the City of Willits and the surrounding areas, and is funded by property taxes, a special fire tax, and fundraisers. The District encompasses 380 square miles and over 10,000 residents. Personnel respond to many vehicle accidents outside the district, especially on Highways 101 and 20, which intersect in Willits and see heavy tourist traffic. Assistance to emergency calls in the area just south of Willits is also supplied by the Ridgewood Ranch Volunteers.

The District's ISO rating is 4 inside the City of Willits and in outlying areas with hydrants, and a Rural 8 in outlying areas within 5 miles of the stations. Within the boundaries of the District are BLM lands, two Indian Rancherias, a large wildlife habitat at the north end of the valley, and three subdivisions of special concern: Pine Mountain Estates, the Ridgewood Subdivision, and

the String Creek Subdivision. Due to the District's high fire risk, there is a strong need for planning requirements more stringent than those currently used by the County Planning and Building Department or imposed by California Public Resources Code section 4290. The department may be reached at (707) 459-6271 or willitsfire@sbcglobal.net.

LONG VALLEY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT is locally known as the Laytonville Fire Department. The District includes 250 square miles and 3000 residents, with an additional 1000 in the extended sphere of influence. Areas of special concern to fire personnel are the Nature Conservancy's Wilderness Lodge and the subdivisions of Ten Mile Creek, Woodman Canyon, Jack of Hearts Creek, and Cherry Creek. The department serves the large Bell Springs area without reimbursement. ISO ratings are 5 in Laytonville proper, 9 in areas beyond five miles from the station, and 10 outside the district. The department may be contacted at (707) 984-6055 or laytfire@mcn.org.

MENDOCINO VOLUNTER FIRE DEPARTMENT covers both an historic coastal business district and numerous homes in WUI subdivisions. Public lands administered by State Parks and CalTrans are located inside the district boundaries, and these to contain high hazard fuels. ISO ratings are 9 for commercial properties and 8 for residential. The lower ratings are due to the lack of a public water system and hydrants in Mendocino; however, two large tenders carry water to fires. The department may be contacted at (707) 937-0131 or mvfd@mcn.org.

PIERCY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT, located just south of the Humboldt County Line in the county's far northwestern corner, the district encompasses only 8 square miles but serves the traffic on Highway 101, at least 200 residents beyond its boundaries, and Richardson Grove State Park without reimbursement. Locations of special wildfire concern are BLM and the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) Red Mountain area to the southeast and the Redwood Forest Foundation Incorporation's (REFI) property consisting of 50,000 acres of forestlands.

POTTER VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT is a nonprofit corporation providing fire protection under an agreement with the Potter Valley Community Services District. The department serves 3500-4500 people spread over 275 square miles, including the portion of Mendocino National Forest within Mendocino County. Very remote areas accessed only by unpaved roads, including but certainly not limited to Sanhedrin Mountain, Hull Mountain, and Lake Pillsbury, also receive its services. Mutual aid is provided to the Upper Lake area in Lake County to the east when requested. The district has no fire hydrants, but the water tender and many agricultural ponds throughout the valley floor give the area an ISO rating of 8.

REDWOOD COAST FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT serves approximately 170 square miles on and near the coast. The ISO rating is 5 in Point Arena and Irish Beach where there are hydrants and 9 in outlying areas. Of special fire concern are the area's state beaches, parks and all the district's ridges, which have not seen fire in 30 to 40 years and are "primed to burn." The department may be contacted at (707) 882-1833 or rcfpd@hughes.net.

REDWOOD VALLEY-CALPELLA FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT serves 82 square miles and 7500 residents. The district includes several Wildland Urban Interface areas of concern, including Black Bart, Tomki, Cave Creek and the eastern half of Greenfield Ranch. The heavily-fueled wildland area at the north end of Lake Mendocino is another one of special concern to the district. The department may be contacted at (707) 485-8121 or rvbfd@comcast.net.

SOUTH COAST FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT is located at the far southwest corner of the county and includes approximately 25 square miles. Its sphere of influence extends 14 miles out Fish Rock Road to the east. The district's equipment is based at stations in Gualala, Anchor Bay, Iversen Ridge, and Ocean Ridge. The lack of defensible space around homes is a major concern, as homes and structures continue to expand into the forested environment. The department may be contacted at (707) 884-4700.

UKIAH FIRE DEPARTMENT operates as a department of the City of Ukiah. Its response area is the 4.5 square miles and 15,500 residents within the Ukiah city limits. Ukiah is the largest government, business, and services center for the county, thousands of additional persons may be in Ukiah during weekday office or shopping hours. The department has by far the largest paid staff in the county of approximately 17 full-time career staff. The Ukiah Fire district boasts an ISO rating of 3. Areas of special concern are Low Gap Park on the city's northwestern boundary and the new homes in the highly-flammable hills to the west of the valley. The department may be contacted at (707) 463-6274 or firedept@cityofukiah.com.

UKIAH VALLEY FIRE DISTRICT responds to emergencies in 80 square miles outside the Ukiah city boundaries, including the valley floor and the surrounding hills which hold hundreds of homes scattered among heavy vegetative fuels. The district has two locations: a main station at the south end of town plus another on Talmage Road. The Talmage Volunteer Fire Station was acquired for the purpose of placing emergency apparatus and equipment on the East side of the Russian River that can be staffed during floods, earthquakes and high fire danger events.

Areas of special wildfire concern in the district are the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Lake Mendocino recreational area, and BLM's Cow Mountain Recreation Area, both of which may see numerous fires each summer. Additionally of concern are the populated Wildland Urban Interface areas of Oak Knoll Road and Fircrest Drive, and Robinson Creek along the valley's western hills; and Redemeyer Road, Deerwood, El Dorado Estates, Vichy Springs, Vichy Hills, Regina Heights, the City of 10,000 Buddhas, and Talmage in the eastern hills. A portion of Greenfield Ranch, and Orr Springs Road also receive service from the District. All these areas have significant ingress/egress problems. Further, the entire area *east* of the Russian River from Lake Mendocino south to Hopland is served by departments based *west* of the river, which could result in a cutoff of services during a major flood or earthquake. The department may be contacted at (707) 462-7921 or uvfd@mcn.org.

WESTPORT VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT is the only one in the county with no authority to levy taxes to support its work. The Department serves a sphere of influence stretching from the Ten Mile River in the south to the Sinkyone Wilderness Area in the north. Of special concern are the Westport Beach RV Campground, Westport Union Landing State Park, and the Sinkyone Wilderness Area. Many homes are scattered on the fire-prone hills outside of town, and a subdivision north of town is growing rapidly. The department may be contacted at (707) 964-4646 or wvfd@hughes.net

WHALE GULCH VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY is located in the far northwestern corner of Mendocino County, west of Piercy. Due to the locations of roads in that area, Whale Gulch volunteers are dispatched from Humboldt County and work in conjunction with Humboldt County fire departments.