

# California Grand Jury News

Here we reproduce news articles in the print and electronic media since 2008 about each of our 58 county grand juries. The vast majority of the articles are about grand jury reports. We hope that this feature is a resource to grand juries, grand jury advisors, CGJA chapters, the media, and the public. Sponsored by the California Grand Jurors' Association, <http://www.cgja.org>

Tuesday, June 30, 2015

## [Stanislaus County] East Side mosquito control district is stung by grand jury report

A civil grand jury report recommends that an outside entity review “widespread” management and human resources problems at East Side Mosquito Abatement District.

And it does not stop there.

The report recommends that Stanislaus County supervisors appoint new members to the district board and consider merging East Side with the Turlock Mosquito Abatement District, which would create one vector control agency for the 1,500-square-mile county.

The grand jury investigated complaints regarding management problems and employee issues, concluding that workers feel intimidated by a foreman, that the district’s human resources system is woefully outdated and that the district needs stronger oversight from board members.

The findings were based on a review of district documents and interviews with county officials, East Side employees and board members, the report said.

“The (grand jury) found that while some allegations were unsubstantiated, there are widespread human resources and management problems within the district,” the report concluded. “The problems are significant and pervasive enough to require wholesale examination by outside experts to recommend corrective actions.”

East Side officials have until mid-August to respond to the findings. A county government spokesman said staff members are digesting the report and will prepare a response within 90 days.

One of the special district’s top responsibilities is controlling mosquitoes that carry potentially deadly West Nile illness in Modesto and other communities north of the Tuolumne River. By reducing the concentration of infected mosquitoes, a vector control district can lower the risk that residents will be infected by mosquito bites.

The grand jury discovered issues that were not raised in the complaint and found that management had a different viewpoint on workforce issues than what was expressed by seasonal and year-round employees, the report said.

Two board members told the grand jury they take a “hands off” approach and allow General Manager Lloyd Douglass to run day-to-day operations.

The report concluded that the Turlock Mosquito Abatement District has a larger year-round staff and is more forward-thinking and proactive in controlling mosquitoes. With a \$5 million budget reserve, East Side has the resources to expand its year-round staff, the report said.

Some of the complaints have focused attention on foreman Kevin Wall. He said Monday he was not aware of complaints that co-workers felt intimidated and that they were not able to air their concerns without fear of retaliation.

“My door is always open,” Wall said. “It always has been and always will be. I have no idea where that could have come from.”

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Wall has been criticized for using a district vehicle to haul materials for a side business. He has a business selling lemonade at carnivals and street fairs.

The foreman said he does not work on the lemonade business on district time and has never been confronted by district officials about his moonlighting.

Douglass, the general manager, said that wasn't so. There was a problem with Wall's side business and "we have addressed that with him." Douglass said he took disciplinary action but could not discuss the details because personnel issues are confidential.

Within the past year, the district hired two brothers whose father retired from the district. Douglass said it was not a violation of district bylaws as long as one family member did not supervise another. The manager added that one of the brothers' job skills were equal to that of his father's.

The grand jury looked into complaints that seasonal employees are not given a clearly defined path to year-round employment. Of the dozen vector control technicians employed by the district, seven are seasonal workers and five are year-round employees.

The district's policies and procedures handbook for employees is outdated and its employee grievance policy was last updated in the late 1980s. The outdated manual talks about union representation even though workers have not had union affiliation for years.

Douglass said he is trying to find out if the complaints of intimidation were from a few employees or the majority of the workforce.

"Intimidation is not the way I want to run this," he said. "I was surprised by that complaint."

The manager said he could suggest that the board hold a special meeting on the findings. He disagreed with the conclusion that board members are not engaged. They have been involved with implementing new equipment and a mapping system for aircraft, attending meetings and dealing with personnel issues, Douglass said.

He said that employing a year-round staff comparable to Turlock's operation would not be financially sustainable without another source of revenue. And it might be difficult to justify full-time employment for some of those workers, he said.

Board Member Carl "Tony" Ott said the board was blindsided by the complaints of employee intimidation and never had a chance to address the issues. He said the district had been in contract with an outside firm to update the employment manual and human resources procedures.

"We are going to study the (grand jury) report and dissect it and see what we need to do," Ott said.

County Supervisor Bill O'Brien said board members have exceeded term limits on East Side's board probably because it's hard to find people to serve. He said the grand jury identified many issues for district leaders to work on, including human resources policies that have not changed for 25 years.

"The talk of consolidation with Turlock may be all it takes to make East Side take a look at its practices," O'Brien said. The supervisor said that, based on comments from residents, East Side has done a good job responding to calls about mosquito problems.

Two board members for Turlock Mosquito Abatement District did not return calls regarding a possible merger with East Side.

A staff member for the county's Local Agency Formation Commission said the agency has asked county government if it wants a study on consolidating the two districts.

According to a LAFCO report on the county's vector control services, done in 2013, there have been past discussions on consolidating the East Side and Turlock districts, which concluded it would not produce significant efficiencies or savings. That is partly because the size of the county would require multiple field offices, the report said.

June 29, 2015

Modesto Bee

By Ken Carlson

Posted by Cambriaman at 2:42 PM



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