

August 9, 2004

Honorable Clifford R. Anderson, III
Presiding Judge
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
P.O. Box 21107
Santa Barbara, CA 93121-1107

Dear Judge Anderson:

The Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District was pleased to have worked with the Grand Jury in investigating the District's operations, services and future planning. The Board of Trustees was impressed with the thorough approach that the Grand Jury used in this study, interviewing people from numerous affected or concerned agencies, and its continued presence at our Board meetings. The District would like to respond to the following findings and recommendations delineated in the Grand Jury Report "Who Ya Gonna Call?" Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District:

Finding 1

Santa Barbara Coastal Control District (SBCVCD) has not always provided enough information to public agencies in its efforts to enhance its role in local communities.

Recommendation 1

SBCVCD needs to make a dedicated effort to provide timely information about their services to the public and public agencies.

Finding 2. Cities in the North County have chosen to remain independent, relying on their own departments to face any health hazard. They do not see the West Nile Virus as a threat.

Recommendation 2

Before any summer outbreak, the cities of Buellton, Lompoc and Santa Maria need to reassure their citizens that they have a mechanism in place to safeguard the public welfare, and monitor and control disease-carrying vectors, even on private properties.

Response to Finding 1

The Board of Trustees agrees with this finding.

The District needs to improve in providing timely information on situations as they unfold. While we have been pro-active in trying to establish the strongest possible defense to the West Nile Virus, we have not been as responsive in providing sufficient information or up-to-date reports on current situations. What complicates the problem of keeping the public abreast of current events is that some diseases remain a constant threat to public health while others appear almost without warning or precedent such as Hanta Virus and West Nile Virus. However we need to realize that we could have been more effective in providing adequate information to the public or interested agencies. We believe that this Grand Jury Report will give us the necessary impetus and focus to correct these deficiencies.

Existing outreach to the general public

To disseminate information to the public, the District has maintained a public information program which uses the news media, a web site, and a variety of educational brochures. In addition, the District has the ability to conduct residential block surveys to investigate roof rat infestations on a complaint-driven basis. It also periodically participates in community sponsored fairs, public library displays, and other similar events.

Existing outreach to public agencies

Over the past 10 years, the District's outreach program to public agencies has generally consisted of various attempts to expand its services in Santa Barbara County. In 1994, the District filed a petition with the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to annex the entire county. The petition was denied without prejudice due to poor economic conditions that were not conducive to levying an assessment which would pay for the service. The District also made a presentation of its programs to Santa Maria in hopes of annexing the city but the City Administration chose to remain independent. Later the District worked with the Fifth District County Supervisor and successfully demonstrated its expertise in controlling a persistent fly problem in commercial agricultural operations. Several years afterwards at the request of the Fifth District Supervisor's Office, LAFCO established the "North County Vector Task Force" consisting of the LAFCO Executive Officer, the City Manager of the City of Santa Maria, a Council member, the Vector Control District Manager, and a member of the District's Board of Trustees.

In 2002, the District annexed all of the remaining unincorporated territory of the entire county. At that time the LAFCO Executive Officer and the County Administration requested each of the county's cities to respond regarding their interest in joining the

District. As of this date, the cities of Buellton, Lompoc, Santa Maria, Guadalupe and Solvang have preferred to remain independent.

The District has been more successful in working in the South County where it has a long history of service. Interactions with public agencies have typically been minimal until the threat of West Nile Virus appeared. The District resolved that it must begin an aggressive program to adequately protect the health and property of its constituency which necessitated greatly expanding the level of treatment in wetland areas and other high risk habitats. This created extraordinary financial problems for UCSB, County Flood Control and Santa Barbara City and lead to acrimonious relations with UCSB and the County Administration. The disagreements were eventually resolved but the District received numerous complaints about heavy handed tactics in trying to gain compliance with its goals.

Lastly, the District actively negotiated with the City of Santa Barbara to proceed with an annexation process which involved voter approval of a property assessment to fund expanded services. That annexation was successfully completed on June 11, 2004.

Implementation of Recommendation 1

The recommendation has not yet been fully implemented, but will be fully implemented in the near future, with a timeframe for implementation. In addition to the existing outreach approaches listed above, the District is working towards ways to enhance its outreach to the general public and public agencies.

Enhanced general public and public agency outreach

Web Site

The District must take several steps to better inform its constituency. In response to the Grand Jury's findings, the District will pursue a policy of updating its web site on a weekly basis and it will be expanded to include two additional features. Due to the rapid spread of the West Nile Virus and the rising public concern, when available, the web site will include a page with links to news releases specific to WNV from across the state. Secondly, it will include the District's Monthly Disease Surveillance Report (a summary of the District's disease surveillance activity within its service area).

Public Service Announcements

The District is in the process of airing commercially produced video presentations on West Nile Virus prevention and precautions. Recently approved by the Board, this video will be aired on the local cable network on a countywide basis during the summer months of 2004. It may be prudent to continue this presentation during the high-risk months while funding lasts.

Public Telephone Book

Currently, Special Districts are not listed in the “Government Pages” under a separate heading similar to State, Cities and Counties. This can be confusing to the public, especially if the precise name of the special district isn’t known. Although the District has little influence in this particular problem it will investigate possible options to improving our listing in the telephone book.

New potential public agency outreach

With the newly discovered existence of WNV in the North County, the cities may reconsider their earlier resistance to outside intervention by the SBCVCD. In future meetings with public agencies (see timeframes below) such as the cities of Buellton, Lompoc, Santa Maria, Guadalupe and Solvang, the District must apply the lessons learned from its work with UCSB, County Flood Control, and the City of Santa Barbara. We should expect disagreements and we must use patience and tact in our negotiations.

Response to Finding 2

The Board of Trustees agrees with this finding. The District agrees with the assessment of the situation in the North County. The Board of Trustees agrees that the Grand Jury Report accurately characterizes the reasons for this unfortunate decision by leaders in the North County which may unnecessarily jeopardize the health and well being of their constituents. Despite the recent arrival of West Nile Virus in the North County, the Board of Trustees anticipates that their reluctance to accept the District's assistance and intervention will persist. Given these circumstances, the North County jurisdictions must comply with Assembly Bill 1454, which sets standards for West Nile Virus response for unprotected cities.

Implementation of Recommendation 2

The recommendation has not yet been fully implemented, but will be implemented in the near future, with a timeframe for implementation.

Enhanced public agency outreach

During the time of Grand Jury investigation the Governor signed Assembly Bill 1454 on May 14, 2004. The Bill requires that jurisdictions without organized mosquito control have two options for combating a West Nile Virus outbreak. Their mosquito abatement programs must be performed by an existing agency (the District) that is a party to the Cooperative Agreement with the California Department of Health Services (DHS) or done in direct consultation with DHS.

Faced with the requirements of AB 1454, the North County cities might well prefer to be annexed by the District rather than work with DHS. However, the District must proceed cautiously and reassure rather than confront the North County leaders. We want the relationships to be cooperative and fruitful for all parties.

This process has already begun with the July 1, 2004 LAFCO meeting. The SBCVCD General Manager advised the Commission of the District's willingness to work with the North County cities in response to the Grand Jury's Report. At that time, the City Representatives on the Commission were updated on the current status of the West Nile Virus outbreak occurring in Southern California.

With the annexation of the City of Santa Barbara completed, the entire process was developed into a model that could be used by each of the remaining cities not within the District. The District will make preliminary contact with each City Manager and City Councils of Buellton, Lompoc, Santa Maria, Guadalupe, and Solvang regarding the proposed annexation model by **January 1, 2005**.

The District will follow up that preliminary contact with Buellton, Lompoc, Santa Maria, Guadalupe, and Solvang no later than **July 1, 2005** and present the annexation model with its funding measures and level of vector control services. The last course of action that the District may take is to fund a property owner assessment survey similar to the one used for the City of Santa Barbara. If positively received by the property owners, this could provide the necessary data for the City Councils to proceed with annexations to the District.

In conclusion, the Board of Trustees would like to thank the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury for their efforts in supporting the District's mission to protect its residents from disease vectors. Should you need any additional information regarding the Report's findings and corresponding District responses, please contact Mitch Bernstein, General Manager at 969-5050, ext 222 or Gerry Winant, President, at 968-6628.

Respectfully,

Gerry Winant, President
Board of Trustees,
Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District

CC. District Board of Trustees
District General Manager
Santa Barbara County Grand Jury