

## **AGENDA ITEM 6.C.**

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**MEETING:** February 24, 2026  
**TO:** Trinity LAFCo Commissioners  
**FROM:** Colette Santsche, Executive Officer  
**SUBJECT:** Summary of Down River Regional Fire Service Provider Meeting

### BACKGROUND

Staff is currently preparing the Down River Regional Fire Services Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence (MSR/SOI) Update, which will evaluate fire protection and emergency response services in the Down River region of Trinity County. The geographic scope aligns with the Trinity County Wildfire Protection Plan and includes the following primary fire service providers:

- Salyer Community Services District (CSD)
- Downriver Volunteer Fire Department (VFD)
- Hawkins Bar Volunteer Fire Department (VFD)

Salyer CSD is the only independent special district within this region. As such, formal Sphere of Influence determinations will apply solely to this agency. However, the MSR will place significant emphasis on mutual aid relationships and opportunities for governance and funding opportunities among providers in the region.

The Downriver and Hawkins Bar VFDs are non-district volunteer departments and do not have sustainable base funding beyond community donations and grants. Regional service is further supported through mutual aid by Willow Creek FPD (Humboldt County) and Junction City FPD.

### DISCUSSION

The Down River region presents unique fire and rescue service conditions, particularly with respect to emergency response along the State Route 299 (SR 299) corridor. Local departments - including Salyer CSD, Downriver VFD, Hawkins Bar VFD, Junction City FPD, and Willow Creek FPD - historically respond to vehicular accidents and other emergencies along SR 299, a state-owned and managed highway.

According to Caltrans District 1, the SR299 segment near Willow Creek averages approximately 8,000 vehicles per day. By comparison, U.S. Highway 101 in Garberville averages approximately 7,000 vehicles per day and is predominantly a four-lane facility. Despite this significant traffic volume and associated emergency response demand, Down River providers do not receive stable state funding dedicated to sustaining emergency medical services and rescue response along state highways.

To support the MSR process, staff facilitated a regional meeting on February 4, 2026, with representatives from all fire service providers in the area. The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Build a shared understanding of current fire and rescue service conditions in the Down River region, with particular focus on SR 299 response.
- Identify common challenges and opportunities that may benefit from continued coordination or joint exploration.

- Clarify what the Down River Fire MSR will include and how it can support local departments.
- Confirm next steps for the MSR and regional coordination.

Regional Successes:

Representatives discussed current conditions and identified several shared successes across departments, including:

- Installation of Starlink systems to address limited broadband access.
- Improvements to SR 299 (additional pullouts and paving). Representatives noted a perception of fewer vehicular accidents in recent years; however, collision data has not yet been evaluated to confirm this trend.
- Strong countywide coordination on grant funding.
- Effective collaboration and mutual aid among Down River fire providers.
- Acquisition of new extrication equipment.

Additional department-specific successes included:

- Implementation of a junior firefighter program (Junction City FPD).
- Establishment of a paid Fire Chief position (Willow Creek FPD).
- Increased volunteer recruitment (Junction City FPD).
- CAL FIRE response support from the Weaverville station, when available (Downriver VFD).

Table 1: Department Successes

	Salyer CSD	Hawkins Bar VFD	Down River VFD	Junction City FPD	Willow Creek FPD
Starlink	X	X	X	X	X
Mobile Starlink		X	X		
SR 299 Improvements	X	X	X	X	X
Junior Program				X	
Paid Fire Chief					X
Increased # of Volunteers				X	
New Extrication Equipment	X	X	X	X	X
Collaboration with Neighboring Providers	X	X	X	X	X
CAL FIRE Response Support from Weaverville Station			X		

Regional Challenges:

All departments identified significant and ongoing challenges. Common themes included:

- Lack of stable and sufficient funding.
- Recruitment and retention difficulties, including aging volunteer bases and limited population growth.
- Rising costs for apparatus, equipment, and turnout gear.

- Consolidation among apparatus manufacturers, reducing purchasing options and increasing costs.
- Lack of administrative capacity to maintain compliance with regulatory requirements.
- High and increasing insurance premiums (particularly for non-district departments), leading some providers to reduce coverage levels.
- Ongoing issues with untimely reimbursement from the U.S. Forest Service for past responses.
- Insufficient supply of turnout gear to meet volunteer needs.
- Limited succession planning and leadership development.

Additional challenges identified by specific providers included:

- Conflict with the County regarding direct charge lists (Salyer CSD).
- Shortage of qualified apparatus drivers (Willow Creek FPD).

Table 2: Department Challenges

	Salyer CSD	Hawkins Bar VFD	Down River VFD	Junction City FPD	Willow Creek FPD
Lack of funds	X	X	X	X	X
Collaboration with USFS (timely payments)		X	X	X	
Volunteer Recruitment and Retention	X	X	X	X	X
Aging Volunteers and Personnel, Lower Influx into the Population	X	X	X	X	X
High Insurance Costs		X	X	X	X
Conflict with the County on Direct Charge Lists	X				
Lack of an Adequate Supply of Turnouts	X	X	X	X	X
Increased Cost of Equipment, More Issues with Apparatus (consolidation among fire apparatus manufacturers)	X	X	X	X	X
Lack of Succession Planning	X	X	X	X	
Lack of Personnel for Admin Duties (difficult to stay in compliance)	X	X	X	X	X
Qualified Drivers for Apparatus					X

Potential Strategies and Next Steps:

Representatives shared what would be most helpful for them to continue providing service or to increase capacity moving forward. These ideas and next steps included:

- Identifying ways to reduce insurance costs or create insurance breaks for small departments.

- Establishing a countywide or regional “turnout closet” to improve gear access and reduce waste associated with volunteer turnover.
- Expanding the role of the Fire Chiefs Association, including exploring formation as a 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) entity.
- Exploring long-term governance models, including a regional or countywide Fire Protection District structure with local battalions.
- Evaluating governance and funding options for Hawkins Bar VFD, including potential district formation or annexation to a neighboring district.
- Exploring a satellite CAL FIRE resident program in Willow Creek, similar to programs in Hayfork and Fawn Lodge.
- Supporting installation of satellite-enabled call boxes along SR 299.
- Supporting legislation addressing the State’s responsibility for EMS and rescue response along state highways.

Willow Creek FPD has drafted a letter to Senator Mike McGuire requesting stable state funding to sustain emergency medical and rescue services along state highways. Down River departments expressed interest in supporting the effort and intend to co-sign the letter once finalized.

Staff will continue engaging with regional providers through the MSR/SOI process to evaluate these issues, assess governance and funding alternatives, and identify feasible implementation strategies.

#### RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends the Commission receive and file this report. The Commission is invited to discuss the item and provide direction to staff as needed.

#### **Attachments:**

- A) Down River Regional Fire Service Provider Meeting Agenda

## MEETING AGENDA

Down River Regional Fire Meeting  
February 4, 2026, 1-3 p.m.  
Salyer Fire Station

### MEETING OBJECTIVES

- Build a shared understanding of current fire and rescue service conditions in the Down River region, with particular focus on SR 299 response.
- Identify common challenges and opportunities that may benefit from continued coordination or joint exploration.
- Clarify what the Down River Fire MSR will include and how it can support local departments.
- Confirm next steps for the MSR and regional coordination.

### AGENDA

Welcome & Review Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Introductions (name, role, department)</li> <li>○ Review meeting purpose and confirm agenda</li> </ul>
Overview of Regional MSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Background and purpose of the Down River Fire Municipal Service Review (MSR)</li> <li>○ What the MSR includes:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agency profiles</li> <li>• Required determinations</li> <li>• Regional context and mapping</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ How the MSR can support local decision making</li> </ul>
Regional Conditions & Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reflections: What Departments are Experiencing (open discussion)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's working well today</li> <li>• Where departments are feeling stretched</li> <li>• How conditions have changed over the last 5-10 years</li> <li>• What feels most uncertain looking ahead</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Shared Themes & Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Review draft maps and regional context</li> <li>○ Discussion on common themes and shared realities:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SR 299 Response</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Current response practices</li> <li>○ Expectations vs. capacity</li> <li>○ Coordination strengths and gaps</li> <li>● Personnel and Capacity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Volunteer recruitment, retention, and aging membership</li> <li>○ Daytime and extended incident coverage</li> <li>○ Informal vs. formal succession planning</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Service Areas and Coverage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ District, non-district, and goodwill responses</li> <li>○ Jurisdictional boundaries vs. response areas</li> <li>○ Mutual aid patterns</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Funding Realities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Existing funding structures</li> <li>○ Stability, predictability, and constraints</li> <li>○ What has been tried locally or regionally</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Exploring Options & Coordination Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discuss options and opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Where are departments already coordinating successfully?</li> <li>● Are there areas where shared approaches (training, admin support, advocacy, equipment, staffing coverage) might help?</li> <li>● What types of options would be useful to learn more about, even if only informational?</li> <li>● What support would help departments remain sustainable while preserving local identity?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How today's discussion will inform the MSR</li> <li>○ Additional information or follow-up conversations needed</li> <li>○ Opportunities for continued coordination or future meetings</li> <li>○ Tentative MSR schedule and upcoming milestones</li> </ul>
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Final reflections</li> <li>○ Summary of key takeaways</li> <li>○ Confirm Follow-up items and timeline</li> </ul>

Thank you!