

AGENDA ITEM 6.A.

MEETING: April 21, 2026
TO: Trinity LAFCo Commissioners
FROM: Colette Santsche, Executive Officer
SUBJECT: Preview of Down River Fire Services MSR/SOI Update

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, as well as other regional, state, and federal partners.

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 fire departments respond to vehicular accidents and other emergencies along SR 299, a state-owned and managed highway.

Willow Creek FPD has drafted a letter (Attachment A) to Senator Mike McGuire and other state representatives requesting stable state funding to sustain emergency medical and rescue services along state highways. Down River departments expressed interest in supporting the effort, and a meeting with state representatives, state agencies, and local departments is scheduled for early May.

Staff is working to prepare a comprehensive MSR/SOI Update of the Down River region. A preview of the introduction section is attached (Attachment B) for Commission review. Staff anticipates bringing an administrative draft of the document to the June 16, 2026, Commission Meeting.

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

Attachment A: Willow Creek FPD Letter

Attachment B: Introduction Section of Down River Regional Fire Services MSR/SOI Update

March 18, 2026

Dear Senator McGuire, Assemblyman Rogers, CAL FIRE, Caltrans, USFS, CHP, and Humboldt and Trinity County Supervisors,

This letter is a follow up to an initial request letter sent on January 29, 2026 regarding the request for a meeting to discuss the lack of State of California fire and medical resources along the State Route 299 Corridor between Junction City east of Weaverville (MM 43), and Lord Ellis Summit between Willow Creek and Blue Lake (MM 17). This meeting will convene of all involved parties and agencies to seriously discuss current and future solutions, including Senator McGuire, Assemblyman Rogers, CAL FIRE, Caltrans, USFS, CHP, and County Supervisors.

Recently, Fire Chiefs from Junction City Volunteer Fire Department (VFD) and Fire Protection District (FPD), Down River VFD, Hawkins Bar VFD, Salyer VFD, and Willow Creek VFD/FPD met to discuss ongoing and worsening issues regarding lack of available personnel or sustainable funding in a region unlike any other in the State, where there are no urban, paid, or State fire departments within adequate response range. From Willow Creek west, the nearest CAL FIRE station is over 50 miles away and does not provide support to responses along State Highway 299. The burden of response then falls on small, rural volunteer fire departments in economically depressed communities where the majority of firefighter-aged residents must work out of the area to support their families. The call volume for these five fire departments has increased drastically over the years, coupled with fewer volunteers able to respond. See Table 1 below.

Department	Average Annual Call Volume	# of Vol. Firefighters (# of daytime active)
Junction City	75	13 (1-2)
Down River	26	2 (1)
Hawkins Bar	100	12 (2-3)
Salyer	130	11 (5)
Willow Creek	350	14 (5)

Table 1. Annual Call Volume and Number of Volunteers per Department

The area between Junction City and Lord Ellis Summit is a windy, 70 mile stretch of State Route 299 that follows the Trinity River (see map in Attachment A), where an average of 8,000 vehicles travel per day (per Caltrans data). State Route 299 is the only STAA-approved route in and out of Humboldt County from the Interstate 5 Highway, and is the major tourist and commercial route between Redding and Eureka. The five fire departments that currently carry

the burden of responding along this State highway are requesting representation, sustainable funding, and State fire and medical personnel to provide 24/7 coverage to the region. Recently, the State of California has supported increasing the number of CAL FIRE personnel and ensuring those firefighters are employed year-round through the Fight for Firefighters Act. As conveyed by Senator McGuire's office, this act is being implemented right now, and we have never had a meeting/summit to address this essential need. We are formally requesting a meeting with all parties involved, including Senator McGuire, Assemblyman Rogers, Humboldt CAL FIRE Unit Chief, Trinity CAL FIRE Unit Chief, USFS, CHP, Humboldt County Supervisor Madrone, Trinity County Supervisor Carpenter-Harris, and Caltrans Districts 1 and 2, whether virtually or in person, as soon as possible to discuss potential solutions for our region.

Sincerely,

Todd Wright
Chief, Hawkins Bar VFD

Dave Murphy
Chief, Salyer VFD

Samantha Brown
Chief, Willow Creek VFD

Gloria Reynolds
Chief, Down River VFD

Justin Kerwick
Chief, Junction City VFD

March 18, 2026
Date

Down River Regional Fire

Municipal Services Review and Sphere of Influence Update



Administrative Draft
April 2026



www.trinitylafco.org

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Acknowledgements:

LAFCo would like to thank the following people for their contributions and instrumental assistance in the completion of this document:

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1.0 MSR/SOI BACKGROUND

The Trinity Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) is preparing this Municipal Service Review (MSR) and Sphere of Influence (SOI) update for fire service providers in the Down River region of Trinity County following the requirements of State law and LAFCo policies. LAFCo acts as the countywide oversight agency that coordinates logical and timely changes to local government boundaries. A primary objective for this MSR is to provide a recommendation for the SOI of Salyer Community Services District (CSD) and to document the service areas and levels of services of the studied agencies including:

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

The Trinity County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) apportions the County into five divisions (Figure 2-1). The Down River region contains the boundaries of all three local fire service providers covered in this MSR/SOI update (Figure 2-2). Regional distinctions of the County will be referred to according to the divisions set forth by the CWPP throughout this report.

Fire service providers in rural areas often face unique obstacles in the provision of services including remote service areas with an aging population and low volunteerism, limited water storage capacity for fire response, limited administrative staff capacity, lack of resources and funding, and more. This MSR will take a systems approach to review the current level of services and identify potential areas of opportunity to increase efficiency and resiliency in the region. This report is organized as follows:

- A background section with additional discussion of LAFCo responsibilities, the legal requirements of MSR/SOI updates, and the methodology and data sources used.
- A summary section with an overview of the County, a brief discussion of current or potential wildfire and evacuation planning impacts, and a summary of MSR findings.
- Agency profiles for each agency within the study area.
- Service review for Salyer CSD and recommended SOI changes where applicable.

1.1 ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF LAFCO

LAFcos are independent regulatory commissions that were established by the State legislature in 1963 to encourage the orderly growth and development of local governmental agencies including cities and special districts. Today, there is a LAFCo in each of California's 58 counties. Trinity LAFCo has a public Commission with seven regular Commissioners and three alternate Commissioners. The Commission is composed of three members of the Trinity County Board of Supervisors, two Special District Representatives, and two Public Members-At-Large. The Commission also includes one alternate member for each represented category.

LAFCo is responsible for implementing the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 ("CKH Act") (California Government Code Section 56000 et seq.) for purposes of facilitating changes in local governmental structure and boundaries that fosters orderly growth and development, promotes the efficient delivery of services, and encourages the preservation of open space and agricultural lands. Some of LAFCo's duties include regulating jurisdictional boundary changes and the extension of municipal services. This includes city and special district annexations, incorporations/formations, consolidations, and other changes of organization. LAFCo seeks to be proactive in raising awareness and building partnerships to accomplish this through its special studies, programs, and actions.

The CKH Act outlines requirements for preparing MSRs for periodic SOI updates. MSRs and SOIs are tools created to empower LAFCo to satisfy its legislative charge of "discouraging urban sprawl, preserving open space and prime agricultural lands, efficiently providing government services, and encouraging the orderly formation and development of local agencies based upon local conditions and circumstances" (Government Code (G.C.) §56301). CKH Act Section 56301 further establishes that "one of the objects of the commission is to make studies and to obtain and furnish information which will contribute to the logical and reasonable development of local agencies in each county and to shape the development of local agencies so as to advantageously provide for the present and future needs of each county and its communities." SOIs therefore guide both the near-term and long-term physical and economic growth and development of local agencies, and MSRs provide the relevant data to inform LAFCo's SOI determinations.

1.2 PURPOSE OF MUNICIPAL SERVICE REVIEWS

As described above, MSRs are designed to equip LAFCo with relevant information and data necessary for the Commission to make informed decisions on SOIs. The CKH Act, however, gives LAFCo broad discretion in deciding how to conduct MSRs, including geographic focus, scope of study, and the identification of alternatives for improving the efficiency, cost-effectiveness, accountability, and reliability of public services.

The purpose of a MSR in general is to provide a comprehensive inventory and analysis of the services provided by local agencies. A MSR evaluates governance structures and efficiencies of service providers - and may also serve as the basis for subsequent LAFCo decisions. The MSR is intended to provide information and analysis to support changes or updates to spheres of influence. A written statement of the study's determinations must be made in the following areas:

- (1) Growth and population projections for the affected area.
- (2) Location and characteristics of any disadvantaged unincorporated communities within or continuous to the sphere of influence.
- (3) Present and planned capacity of public facilities, adequacy of public services, and infrastructure needs or deficiencies.

- (4) Financial ability of the agency to provide services.
- (5) Status of and opportunities for shared facilities.
- (6) Accountability for community service needs, including governmental structure and operational efficiencies.
- (7) Any other matter related to effective or efficient service delivery, as required by Commission policy.

This MSR is organized according to these determinations listed above. Information regarding each of the above issue areas is provided in this document.

1.3 PURPOSE OF SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

In 1972, LAFCos were given the power to establish SOIs for all local agencies under their jurisdiction. As defined by the CKH Act, "sphere of influence" means a plan for the probable physical boundaries and service area of a local agency, as determined by the commission" (G.C. §56076). All boundary changes, such as annexations, must be consistent with an agency's SOI with limited exceptions.

Pursuant to Trinity LAFCo policy, a MSR is conducted prior to or in conjunction with its mandate to review and update each local agency's sphere of influence every five years or as necessary. The MSR process is intended to inform the Commission as to the availability, capacity, and efficiency of local governmental services prior to making SOI determinations.

LAFCo is required to make five written determinations when establishing, amending, or updating an SOI for any local agency that address the following (G.C. §56425(c)):

- (1) The present and planned land uses in the area, including agricultural and open space lands.
- (2) The present and probable need for public facilities and services in the area.
- (3) The present capacity of public facilities and adequacy of public services that the agency provides or is authorized to provide.
- (4) The existence of any social or economic communities of interest in the area if the commission determines that they are relevant to the agency.
- (5) For an update of an SOI of a city or special district that provides public facilities or services related to sewers, municipal and industrial water, or structural fire protection, the present and probable need for those public facilities and services of any disadvantaged unincorporated communities within the existing sphere of influence.

Service reviews may also contain recommendations for SOI or government structure changes needed to implement positive service changes. Where more detailed analysis of service options is necessary, service reviews may contain recommendations for special studies where there is the potential to reduce service gaps and improve service levels.

1.4 DISADVANTAGED UNINCORPORATED COMMUNITIES

SB 244 (Chapter 513, Statutes of 2011) made changes to the CKH Act related to disadvantaged unincorporated communities, including mandating the incorporation of an SOI determination focusing on the topic. A disadvantaged unincorporated community (DUC) is defined as an inhabited territory containing 12 or more registered voters, where the median household income of the area is less than 80 percent of the State of California's median household income.

Pursuant to Government Code §56425(e)(5), LAFCOs are required to make written determinations regarding the present and probable need for public facilities and services—including water, wastewater, and structural fire protection—in any disadvantaged unincorporated communities within or contiguous to an SOI. In addition, pursuant to Government Code §56425(c), these communities are recognized as social and economic communities of interest for purposes of SOI determinations.

1.5 REVIEW METHODS

The following information was considered in the development of this service review:

- Agency-specific data: responses to LAFCo Requests for Information
- Demographic data: U.S. Census Bureau; Department of Finance
- Finances: budgets and audits; State Controller's Office
- Personal Communications with District staff/Board and Department volunteers
- Other Reports: Trinity County Community Wildfire Prevention Plan Update 2020; Trinity County 2050 General Plan Update Public Review Draft Background Report; Trinity County 2019-2024 Housing Element Update

The information gathered was analyzed and applied to make the required determinations. All information gathered for this report is filed by LAFCo for future reference.

1.6 CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is contained in Public Resources Code §21000 et seq. Public agencies are required to evaluate the potential environmental effects of their actions. CEQA Guidelines are contained in the California Code of Regulations (CCR) and provide guidance on compliance with CEQA. MSRs are statutorily exempt from CEQA pursuant to CCR §15262 (feasibility or planning studies) and categorically exempt pursuant to CCR §15306 (information collection).

CEQA requirements are sometimes applicable to SOI Updates. The CEQA lead agency for SOI Updates is most often LAFCo, unless an agency has initiated an SOI expansion or update. In the case of the SOI amendments contained in this report, they are considered exempt under CEQA Guidelines §15061(b)(3) or the Common Sense exemption because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment. The changes in SOIs are related to the response areas of the various districts and do not extend water, wastewater, or other services that may induce growth or otherwise impact the environment.

2.0 REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Trinity County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) apportions the County into five divisions (Figure 2-1). The Down River region contains the boundaries of all three fire service providers covered in this MSR/SOI update (Figure 2-2).

Figure 2-1: Trinity County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) Divisions

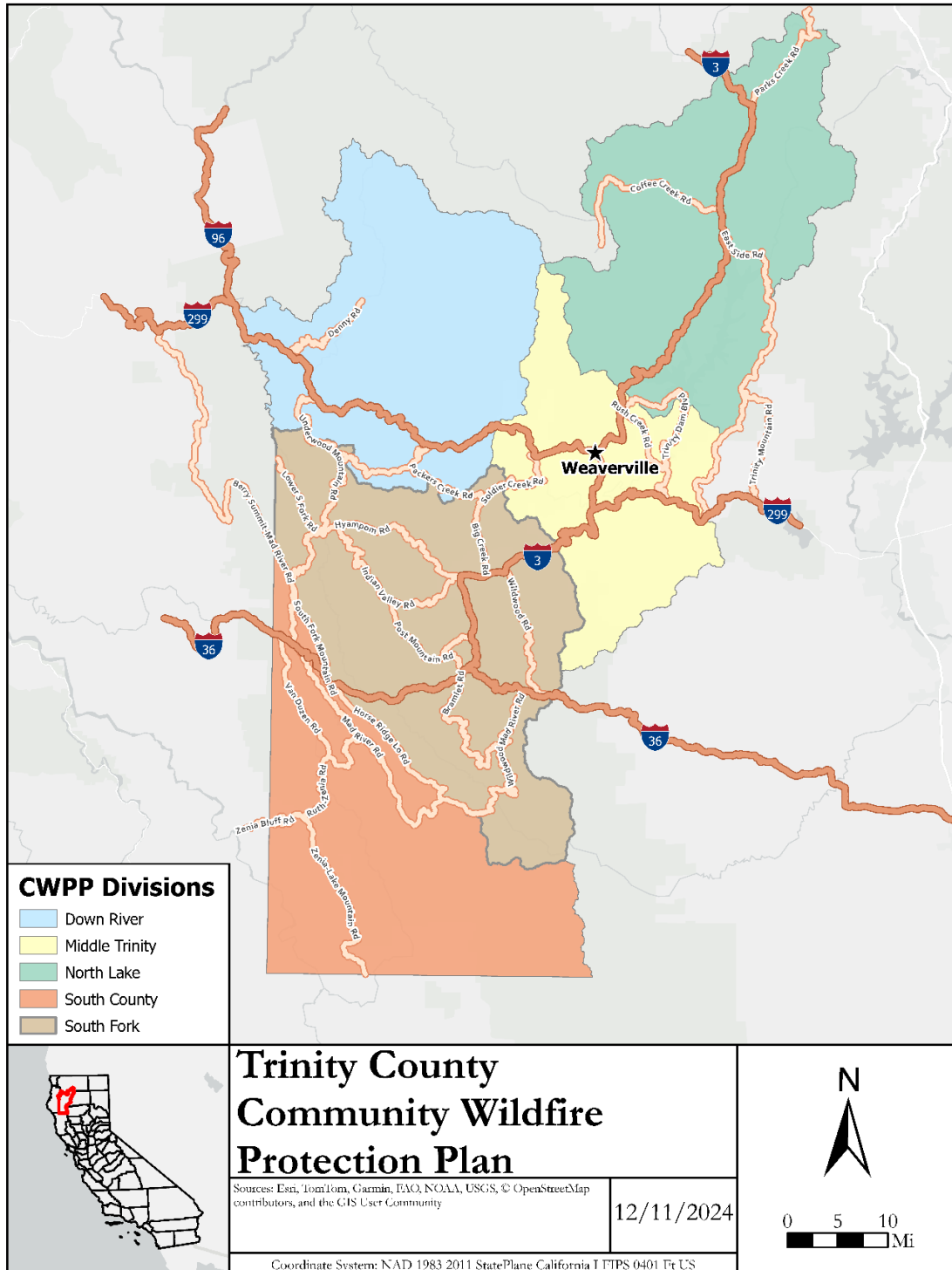
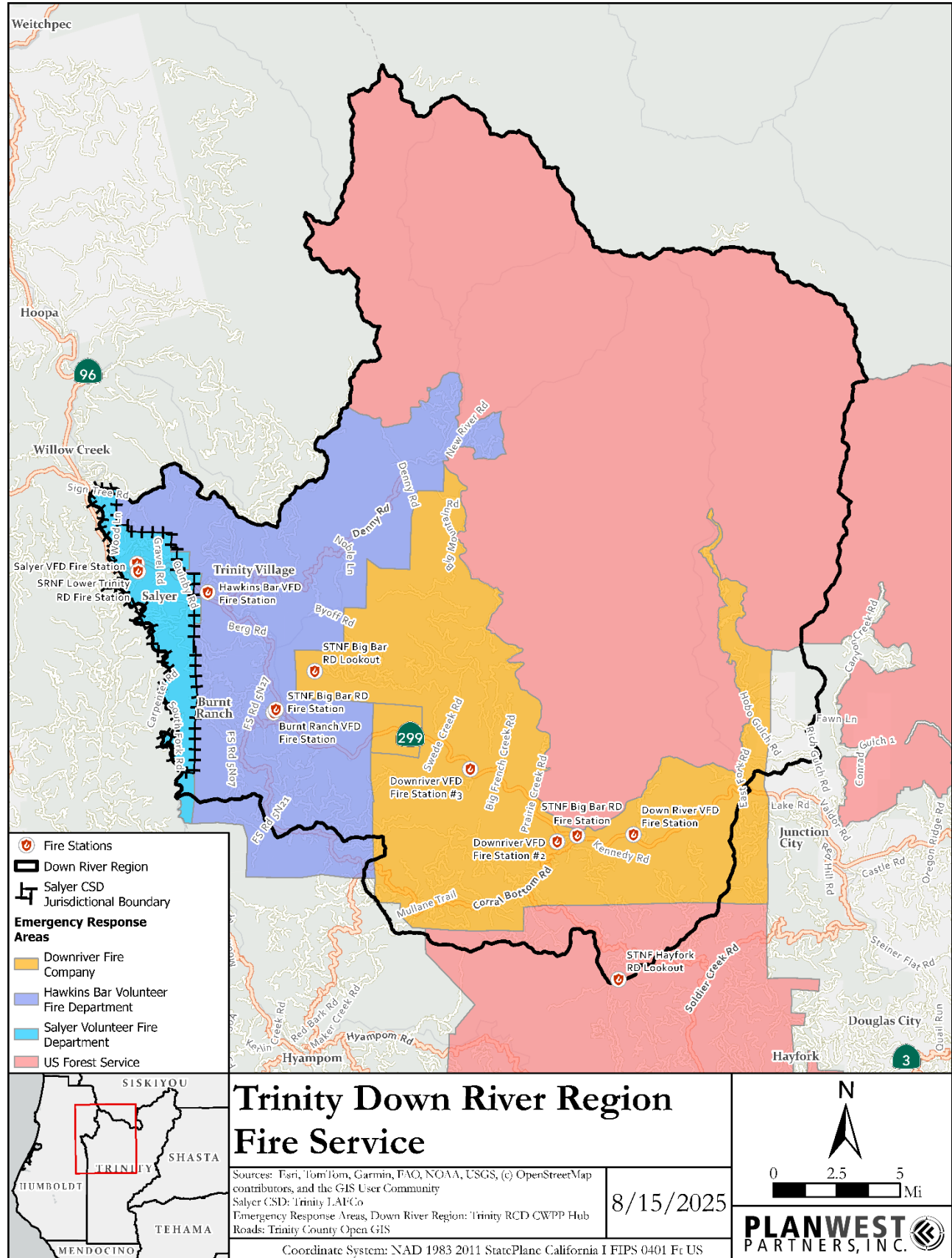


Figure 2-2: Down River Fire-Related District and Department Boundaries



2.1 TRIBAL LANDS

Within the geographical boundary of Trinity County, there are ancestral tribal lands for numerous native peoples including the Tsnungwe, Chimariko, and Wintu. All three of these tribes occupied the northwest region of Trinity County, overlapping with the Down River region.

Tsnungwe

The Tsnungwe's largest village was located at the confluence of the South and Main Forks of the Trinity River, near present-day Salyer. This village, te:ldin, was an important trade center for the area and the many neighboring tribes. The Tsnungwe people spoke in a Hupa dialect but frequently spoke many other languages due to the importance of te:ldin as an economic trade center¹.

The influx of European settlers and miners to the region during the California Gold Rush drastically altered the Tsnungwe's way of life. The Tsnungwe signed treaties with the settlers in 1851 and 1864, but these were never ratified. The Tsnungwe people were removed to the Hoopa Reservation, fled, or were killed by settlers in conflicts. Many years later, some Tsnungwe people returned to their homelands and worked to regain their way of life.

The Tsnungwe peoples are led by two councils: the elders council, is composed of family leaders from the original Tsnungwe families, and the general council is made up of current adult tribal members. The general council manages tribal affairs but only with elder council approval.

Chimariko

The Chimariko people originally lived along the Trinity River, with smaller settlements on the New River² and South Fork tributaries to the Trinity. They were a small tribe and like many other tribes in the area, suffered extreme population decline during the California Gold Rush. Surviving Chimariko largely left the area and lived with surrounding tribes.

Wintu

Historically, the Wintu lived in the northern part of the Sacramento Valley on the western side, from the Sacramento River to the Coast Range. These peoples also lived in the southern portion of the Upper Sacramento River, the southern portion of the McCloud River, the upper Trinity River, and the west side of the Sacramento River near present-day Chico³. The Wintu subsisted off of the waters of the area and resources from nearby mountains⁴. The Wintu were stewards of the land and engaged in indigenous prescribed fire practices to benefit the landscape.

European colonization and the discovery of gold resulted in the transmission of smallpox and influenza and the outright extermination of the Wintu peoples, largely decimating the tribe's population⁵. The California Gold Rush motivated Europeans to forcefully relocate the Wintu to other lands.

Today, the Wintu peoples largely live on reservations and rancherias in Colusa, Glenn, Yolo, Mendocino, and Shasta counties⁶ including the Redding Rancheria. The Wintu Tribe of Northern California has a Museum and Cultural Resource Center in Shasta Lake, California and has a

¹ Tsnungwe Tribe. (2019). Who We Are. <https://dannynammon.wixsite.com/website>

² AAA Native Arts. (n.d). Chimariko Tribe of California. <https://www.aaanativearts.com/chimariko-tribe#:~:text=Traditional%20Territory:,South%20Fork%20and%20New%20Rivers.>

³ Redding Rancheria. (n.d). *Our Tribes*. Wintu. [https://www.reddingrancheria-nsn.gov/our-tribes/#:~:text=The%20Wintu%20\(also%20Northern%20Wintun,of%20the%20Penutian%20language%20family.](https://www.reddingrancheria-nsn.gov/our-tribes/#:~:text=The%20Wintu%20(also%20Northern%20Wintun,of%20the%20Penutian%20language%20family.)

⁴ National Park Service. (2023, December 14). *History & Culture*. The Wintu. <https://www.nps.gov/whis/learn/historyculture/the-wintu.htm>

⁵ Trinity County Chamber of Commerce. (2023, May 16). *Natural and Cultural History*. The Wintu Indians. <http://www.trinitycounty.com/index.php/2023/05/16/natural-and-cultural-history/>

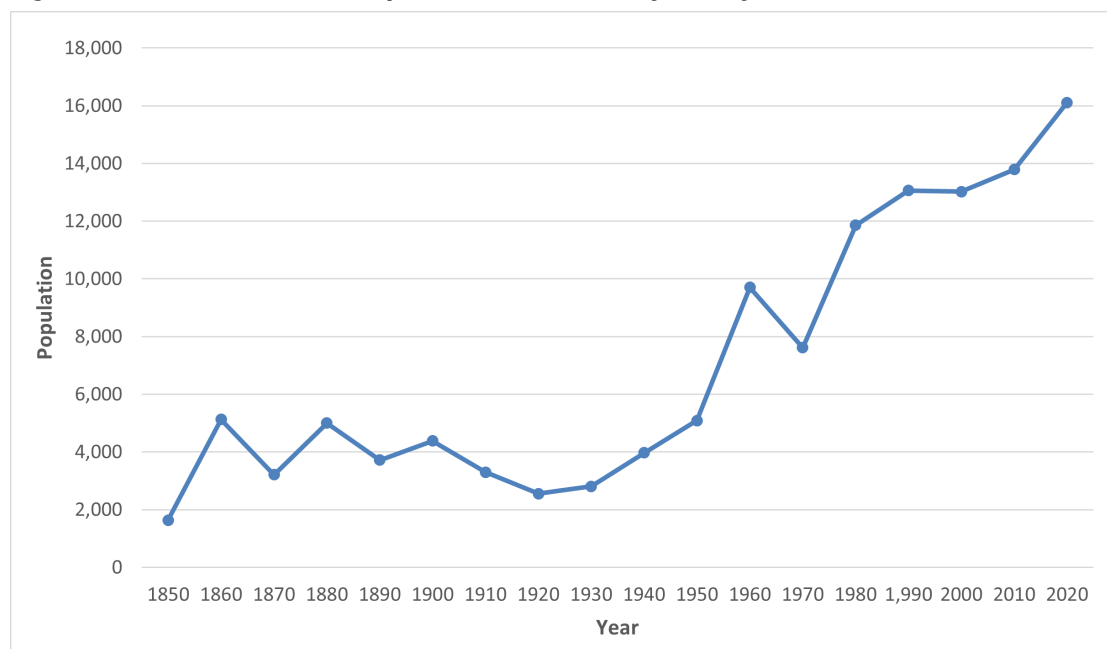
⁶ Pritzker, B. (2000). *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples*. Oxford University Press.

government-to-government relationship with the State and the City of Shasta Lake⁷. The Tribe has a tribal council, is involved in community events, and exercises the currently attainable native rights allowed under current policies.

2.2 TRINITY COUNTY POPULATION

Trinity County was established in 1850 and was included in the 1850 census. The area of the County was much larger in 1850 than present-day as it was one of the original 27 counties in California and would later lose much of its land to create additional counties in the state. At the time of establishment, the County had a recorded aggregate population of 1,635⁸. Since the 1920s, the County has seen steady population growth, and the current population is approximately 16,112⁹ according to the 2020 decennial census. Like most areas in the state, the highest population growth occurred from 1940 to 1960 (Figure 2-3). During this time the population of the County more than doubled from 3,970 to 9,706 (5,736 persons). From 1970 to 1980 the County saw another large population increase of approximately 4,243 persons which continued to steadily grow until 2010, when another significant population increase of 2,326 persons occurred between 2010 and 2020.

Figure 2-3: Decennial Census Population Data for Trinity County



Data Source: US Department of Finance. (August 13, 2021). Historical Census Populations: 1850-2020. California, Counties, and Incorporated Cities/Towns.

Population growth projections are prepared for the State and its counties by the State Department of Finance (DOF) and were last published in 2023. The DOF Economic Forecast projects that the County population will decline and reach 15,330 in 2050. This decline is based on the County's annual out-migration exceeding its in-migration and having an aging population, combined with annual deaths exceeding new births. The surge in positive net in-migration from 2012-2020 shown in Figure 2-3 is potentially coming to an end and is not anticipated to occur again between now and 2050. However, DOF projections do not include other factors that could influence local or regional population changes

⁷ The Wintu Tribe. (n.d.) *About Us*. <https://wintutribe.com/what-we-do/>

⁸ DeBow, J. D. B. (1853). *1850 Census: The Seventh Census of the United States*. Table of Counties, Districts, and Parishes in the United States. Washington: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850a/1850a-14.pdf>

⁹ US Census Bureau. (2020). Table P1 Race

such as possible future movements from urban areas to less populated areas or changes to regional economic conditions.

A population decline of 0.4 percent is used in this review. This rate is consistent with the population projections set forth by the DOF based on County trends and characteristics. It is unlikely that there will be substantial growth in the communities under review.

2.3 GOVERNANCE AND STAFFING

Governance and staffing are persistent challenges for rural fire protection districts, particularly in areas characterized by small, dispersed populations and limited local workforce availability. Many districts rely on a small pool of community members to serve in governance roles, and filling board vacancies can be difficult over time. Similarly, fire protection services in these areas are often heavily dependent on volunteer personnel, whose availability may fluctuate due to work, family, and other commitments.

Volunteer recruitment and retention remains a central issue across rural fire service providers. In many cases, a core group of dedicated individuals provides a disproportionate share of response and administrative capacity, which can lead to fatigue and long-term sustainability concerns. At the same time, limited administrative staffing and financial resources constrain a district's ability to prioritize recruitment, training, and organizational development.

Rural districts also tend to operate with constrained and variable revenue sources, often including a combination of property tax allocations, grants, and service-related funding. While grant funding can be critical for maintaining equipment and service levels, it is typically project-specific and may not support ongoing operational or administrative needs. This can make long-term planning, including capital improvements and staffing stability, more difficult.

Administrative capacity is another important consideration. Maintaining consistent financial reporting, audits, and other required documentation can be challenging for districts with limited staff or reliance on part-time support. These constraints are not uncommon in rural settings and can affect a district's ability to compete for external funding or financing opportunities.

To support long-term sustainability, rural fire protection districts may consider opportunities to enhance administrative and service capacity through shared services, partnerships, or organizational restructuring (e.g., annexation or consolidation). These approaches can help distribute administrative responsibilities, improve service reliability, and position districts to better meet future demands. Additional discussion of these options is provided in subsequent sections of this report.

2.4 FIREWISE COMMUNITIES

The Firewise USA® program, administered by the National Fire Protection Association, provides a framework for communities to organize and implement local wildfire preparedness and risk reduction efforts. In California, the program is supported by CAL FIRE and implemented locally through partnerships with regional organizations.

Firewise efforts are coordinated in collaboration with the Trinity County Resource Conservation District, which provides technical assistance for completing required components such as community wildfire risk assessments and three-year action plans. These locally driven efforts are an important complement to fire protection services, particularly in remote areas where response times and resource availability may be limited.

Several communities within the Down River area—including Hawkins Bar, Salyer, Big Bar/Big Flat, and Burnt Ranch—have obtained Firewise USA® recognition. These areas generally correspond to the service areas of the Salyer CSD, Down River VFD, and Hawkins Bar VFD. The Firewise program supports

community-level coordination around defensible space, fuel reduction, and emergency preparedness, helping to reduce overall wildfire risk.

Participation in the Firewise USA® program can also improve a community's competitiveness for state and federal grant funding, which is critical for rural areas with limited financial capacity. In addition, some insurance providers offer incentives or premium considerations for properties located within recognized Firewise communities, further supporting local resilience efforts.

2.5 WILDFIRE

Wildfire is the largest hazardous threat in Trinity County and wildfire activity has only increased throughout the years. From 1998 to 2024, 40 percent of the County's land has been affected by wildfires; up from 12 percent from 1990 to 1998. Beginning in the early 2000s, the County shifted its proactive fire management planning efforts from primarily wildland firefighting to focusing more on fuels reduction and fire prevention, leading to the development of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) - one of the first in the country.

The CWPP identifies and prioritizes fuel reduction projects for the County and serves as support for grant funding applications. The Trinity Fire Safe Council (FSC), founded in 1998, consists of representatives from local volunteer fire departments, land management agencies (local, state, and federal), citizens, and other non-governmental organizations. The FSC improves the coordination and cooperation of wildfire management in the County.

Recent major wildfires in the County include the Monument Wildfire (222,946 acres burned) and Haypress River Complex Wildfire (192,507 acres burned) in 2021, the August Complex Wildfire (1,028,897 acres burned) in 2020, and the Carr-Delta Wildfire (229,475 acres burned) in 2018. Many of these wildfires impacted neighboring counties and required multijurisdictional collaboration for effective firefighting response. Collaboration was facilitated by the FSC, Trinity County Fire Chief's Association (TCFCA), Trinity County Resource Conservation District (TCRCD), CAL FIRE, local fire departments, and other entities responsible for fire suppression services. Wildfire risk is of significant concern to the local responders in the County and is a significant challenge for the area.

2.6 EMERGENCY ACCESS AND EVACUATION PLANNING

Trinity County is a rural, mountainous area with approximately 1,884¹⁰ miles of maintained roads. Residents primarily travel via personal vehicle due to the region being physically isolated with connectivity challenges. Road closures due to severe weather such as snow or landslides, traffic collisions, or poor pavement conditions severely limit emergency access and evacuation planning. Emergency responders and evacuation planning must consider and be prepared for the numerous challenges that threaten effective emergency responses.

Trinity County frequently receives rain and snow storms in the winter months. Snow removal is conducted in accordance with the County's Snow Removal policy #2010-01, which provides for snow removal on County roads after an accumulation of more than three inches of snow prior to 3:00 pm. Snow removal is not conducted by the County on private roads, state highways (including SR-299), or roads not winter maintained. The County prioritizes the removal of snow on main roads and school bus routes; then roads classified as major collector or arterial, and those requested by Sheriff Dispatch via emergency request; then roads classified as minor collector, bus routes, or public spaces; and then other County roads. The County has limited staff in its Road Maintenance Division and limited funding, which impacts its ability to provide effective snow removal in the case of a storm. In the case of

¹⁰ Trinity County Transportation Commission, 2022. 2022 Trinity County Regional Transportation Plan. <https://www.trinitycounty.org/sites/default/files/DOT/2023%2BTrinity%2BCounty%2BRTP%2B-%2BPUBLIC%2BDRAFT.pdf>

emergency responses or evacuation planning, snow can pose a serious risk to effective transportation requiring alternative routes or other mitigation tactics.

Narrow, curving roadways, similar to many of the roads in Trinity County, can contribute to vehicle collisions. A majority of collisions in the area happen on State Route 299 (SR-299), which serves as the main access road in and out of the County, connecting into Shasta and Humboldt counties. The provision of fire services to SR-299 is a unique and persistent challenge for the Down River region. Collisions heavily impact traffic access including emergency responses and evacuation routes.

The 2020 Pavement Condition Index (PCI) for Trinity County was 54 on a scale of 0-100, which is an overall increase from the 2012 PCI of 50. Lower PCIs indicate declining pavement conditions which can lead to higher repair costs. As with most municipalities, funding for roadway repair and maintenance can be difficult to obtain. Declining pavement conditions can impact fire service providers' abilities to effectively provide services, especially when responses are in the more rural parts of the County or require larger fire engines.

3.0 MUTUAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Down River region experiences similar challenges to those of other rural fire departments. The area also 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 (located in Humboldt County) – historically respond to vehicular accidents and other emergencies along SR 299, a state-owned and managed highway.

3.1 SHARED CHALLENGES

The fire service providers reviewed have shared challenges (Table 3-1) that are largely consistent with those experienced by providers in other rural communities, notably issues with limited funding, aging equipment and facilities, and volunteer recruitment and retention. The communities under review are aging and experiencing little to no population growth, which results in a minimal pool of potential volunteers. Current volunteers are, in turn, experiencing high levels of burnout from working more to compensate for the low volunteerism rates in the area. The limited number of volunteers also results in limited leadership development or succession planning for the future of the departments. Additionally, these departments lack paid or dedicated staff to assist with administrative work. This lack of administrative capacity results in the departments struggling to maintain compliance with regulatory requirements.

Rising apparatus, equipment, and insurance costs are causing increased strain on these already financially burdened departments. Some of the departments under review have opted to reduce insurance coverage levels for select department assets as it was determined to be the more cost-effective option. Particularly, volunteer fire departments that are non-districts have experienced exceptionally high and increasing insurance premiums in recent years. Apparatus manufacturers have consolidated in recent years, thus reducing the available purchasing options and overall increasing costs for apparatus upgrades. The purchasing of turnout gear has also been identified as a significant financial cost for departments, which is further exacerbated by the frequent turnover of volunteers. Turnouts are ordered in the sizes needed by the particular volunteer and due to long processing times, they often arrive after the volunteer has already ceased working with the department.

In the Down River region—and throughout much of Trinity County—large portions of the landscape are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Local fire providers routinely respond to incidents on these federal lands as part of mutual and automatic aid, yet have reported ongoing challenges with delayed or inconsistent reimbursement for those responses. These delays can create cash flow constraints and add administrative burden for small districts with limited staffing and reserves.

In addition, local departments regularly respond to incidents along State Route 299, a critical transportation corridor that generates a significant share of emergency call volume. While these responses are essential for public safety, they are not directly tied to a dedicated or proportional local funding source. As a result, departments are often absorbing the cost of providing service beyond their core service areas, including federal lands and state highway incidents, without reliable cost recovery. This dynamic places additional strain on already limited financial resources and highlights a structural mismatch between service demand and available funding.

Table 3-1: Shared Challenges Among Departments

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

3.2 SHARED SUCCESSES

While many accomplishments are unique to particular departments, there have been multiple identified shared successes among all three departments in review (Table 3-2). The Down River region has seen notable improvements in recent years regarding internet service access, highway improvements, and coordination with regional partners. This region of the state has a long history of sparse adequate internet and phone service due to its remote geography and infrastructure vulnerability. There are frequent outages of internet and phone services. These communication issues are a serious concern with providing fire services in the area. The three departments in review have installed Starlink systems, some with additional mobile Starlink installed on apparatus, to address this limited broadband access.

While providing service along SR-299 is a significant challenge for the region's providers, there have been noted improvements to the highway in recent years including additional pullouts and paving projects. The departments under review have a perception of fewer vehicular accidents along SR-299 in recent years; more collision data is needed to confirm this trend.

Numerous volunteer fire departments in Trinity County received grant funding through Senator Mike McGuire for the purchase of new or upgraded extrication equipment in 2025. The departments under review noted strong collaboration between providers in the region and the County, specifically effective countywide coordination on grant funding and regional collaboration and mutual aid efforts on providing fire services in the Down River region.

Table 3-2: Shared Successes Among Departments

	Salyer CSD	Hawkins Bar VFD	Down River VFD
Starlink	X	X	X

Mobile Starlink		X	X
SR 299 Improvements	X	X	X
New Extrication Equipment	X	X	X
Collaboration with Neighboring Providers	X	X	X
CAL FIRE Response Support from Weaverville Station			X

3.3 POTENTIAL STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Regional Coordination

Given the geographic isolation and communication limitations in the Down River region, enhanced coordination among local, state, and regional partners represents a key opportunity to improve service delivery. Local providers have identified the potential installation of satellite-enabled call boxes along State Route 299 (SR-299) as a priority to address gaps in emergency communication coverage. Implementation would require coordination with the County Transportation Department, California Department of Transportation, and the California Highway Patrol.

There are also opportunities to improve operational efficiency through shared resources. One example is the establishment of a regional “turnout closet” which would allow participating departments to share personal protective equipment. Given the high cost and size-specific nature of turnout gear, a centralized system could reduce redundant purchases, better accommodate volunteer turnover, and improve overall equipment availability across agencies.

Rising insurance premiums continue to place significant financial pressure on volunteer fire departments. This issue is particularly acute for Hawkins Bar VFD and Down River VFD, which rely on limited and variable funding sources. Exploring options to reduce insurance costs—such as risk mitigation programs, regional pooling, or advocacy for state-level relief—may be critical to maintaining service levels. By comparison, Salyer CSD has not identified insurance costs as a major constraint, likely reflecting differences in organizational structure and funding stability.

Coordination with CAL FIRE on State Route 299 (SR-299) Responses

The SR-299 corridor between Junction City (MM 43) and Lord Ellis Summit (MM 17) represents a significant and ongoing source of emergency response demand along an approximately 70-mile stretch of roadway. This corridor’s design—characterized by narrow lanes, sharp curves, elevation changes, and limited visibility—contributes to a high incidence of traffic collisions and emergency calls. Most recently in 2026, four young adults were killed, and two people were seriously injured in a head-on collision along this SR-299 corridor due to one of the vehicles crossing “into the eastbound lane while negotiating a curve”¹¹. Despite the hazards and high call volume, local providers do not receive dedicated or proportional funding to support emergency medical and rescue services along this state highway.

Traffic volumes further underscore this imbalance. According to Caltrans District 1, the SR-299 segment near Willow Creek averages approximately 8,000 vehicles per day—comparable to or exceeding volumes on segments of U.S. Highway 101, such as in the Garberville area of southern Humboldt which averages approximately 7,000 vehicles per day and is predominantly a four-lane

¹¹ Brenna O’Boyle. (January 25, 2026). “4 die in head-on crash near Shasta-Trinity National Forest”. <https://www.kolotv.com/2026/01/25/4-die-head-on-crash-near-shasta-trinity-national-forest/>

facility that benefit from more robust infrastructure and service support. This level of use generates a regional service demand that extends beyond the capacity of local funding mechanisms.

In response, regional partners have begun exploring strategies to secure more sustainable support. Willow Creek FPD has initiated outreach to Senator Mike McGuire to advocate for dedicated state funding for local emergency response along state highways. Other ideas include the exploration of implementing a satellite CAL FIRE resident program in Willow Creek that would increase the presence of paid state personnel. Currently, the nearest CAL FIRE stations are located more than 50 miles west of Willow Creek, in Hayfork, and in Weaverville. These stations are not positioned to consistently serve the Down River segment of SR-299, highlighting a gap in regional response coverage.

Governance Models and Options

Discussions with fire service providers in the Down River region indicate a shared interest in exploring alternative governance structures that improve long-term service sustainability and funding stability. One concept is the consolidation/formation of a regional or countywide fire protection district that retains localized service delivery through existing volunteer departments as battalions while establishing a more consistent administrative and funding framework. Such a model could enhance coordination, reduce administrative burdens on individual agencies, and provide access to stable revenue mechanisms, including special taxes or assessments.

More immediate opportunities may exist through consolidation or reorganization among the agencies evaluated in this study. Hawkins Bar VFD and Down River VFD, as non-district entities, do not have access to the same base funding opportunities that Salyer CSD has, due to their non-district status. These departments rely on community donations, grants, and reimbursements as their base funding. This approach presents ongoing sustainability challenges, particularly as operational costs increase. Options such as district formation, annexation to an existing district (e.g., Salyer CSD), or consolidation with neighboring providers may improve financial stability, administrative capacity, and service reliability. These options are discussed further in the individual agency profiles.

The Trinity County Fire Chiefs Association (FCA) also represents a potential platform for strengthening regional coordination. Formalizing the FCA as a nonprofit entity (e.g., 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4)) could expand its ability to pursue grant funding, accept tax-deductible contributions, and support shared regional initiatives. This structure may provide smaller, volunteer-based departments with improved access to funding and administrative resources that are difficult to secure independently.