

AGENDA ITEM 6.A.

MEETING: June 16, 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)
- Down River 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 structure and funding opportunities among providers in the region.

The Down River 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. Staff attended a meeting organized by Willow Creek FPD discussing the challenges associated with providing services in this area on May 6, 2026, with many attendees including state representatives, state agencies, and local departments.

As part of the ongoing MSR/SOI Update of the Down River region, staff has prepared a preliminary evaluation of potential governance restructuring opportunities for the region. The attached excerpt (Attachment A) outlines three primary options: (1) annexation of lands east of Salyer CSD's existing boundary to Del Loma; (2) annexation of lands east of Salyer CSD's existing boundary to Big Bar; and (3) formation of a fire protection district encompassing the current Hawkins Bar VFD response area and a portion of the Down River VFD response area.

The attached analysis is intended to facilitate an early policy discussion regarding long-term service sustainability, governance, and funding opportunities in the Down River region. Staff is not requesting

direction or action at this time but welcomes Commissioner feedback on the preliminary alternatives and regionalization concepts presented in Attachment A.

Staff anticipates bringing a complete administrative draft of the Down River MSR/SOI Update to the August 18, 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: Potential Governance Structure Options for Down River Fire Service Provision

3.4 GOVERNANCE MODELS AND OPTIONS

Discussions with local fire service providers in the Down River region indicate a shared recognition that the current service delivery model may not be sustainable over the long term. While the Down River region faces many of the same challenges as rural volunteer fire departments throughout California (declining volunteerism, increasing training and regulatory requirements, aging infrastructure, and limited access to stable funding sources), these challenges are exacerbated by the area's geographic isolation, extensive Highway 299 corridor responsibilities, limited population base, aging residents, and substantial public land ownership that reduces the local tax base available to support fire protection services.

These challenges are particularly evident within the Down River response area. The department reportedly has only one active volunteer responsible for serving a long and geographically isolated section of the Highway 299 corridor. As a result, Hawkins Bar VFD regularly responds to incidents as far west as Del Loma, while Junction City FPD frequently provides response coverage into the Big Flat area (Figure 3-1).

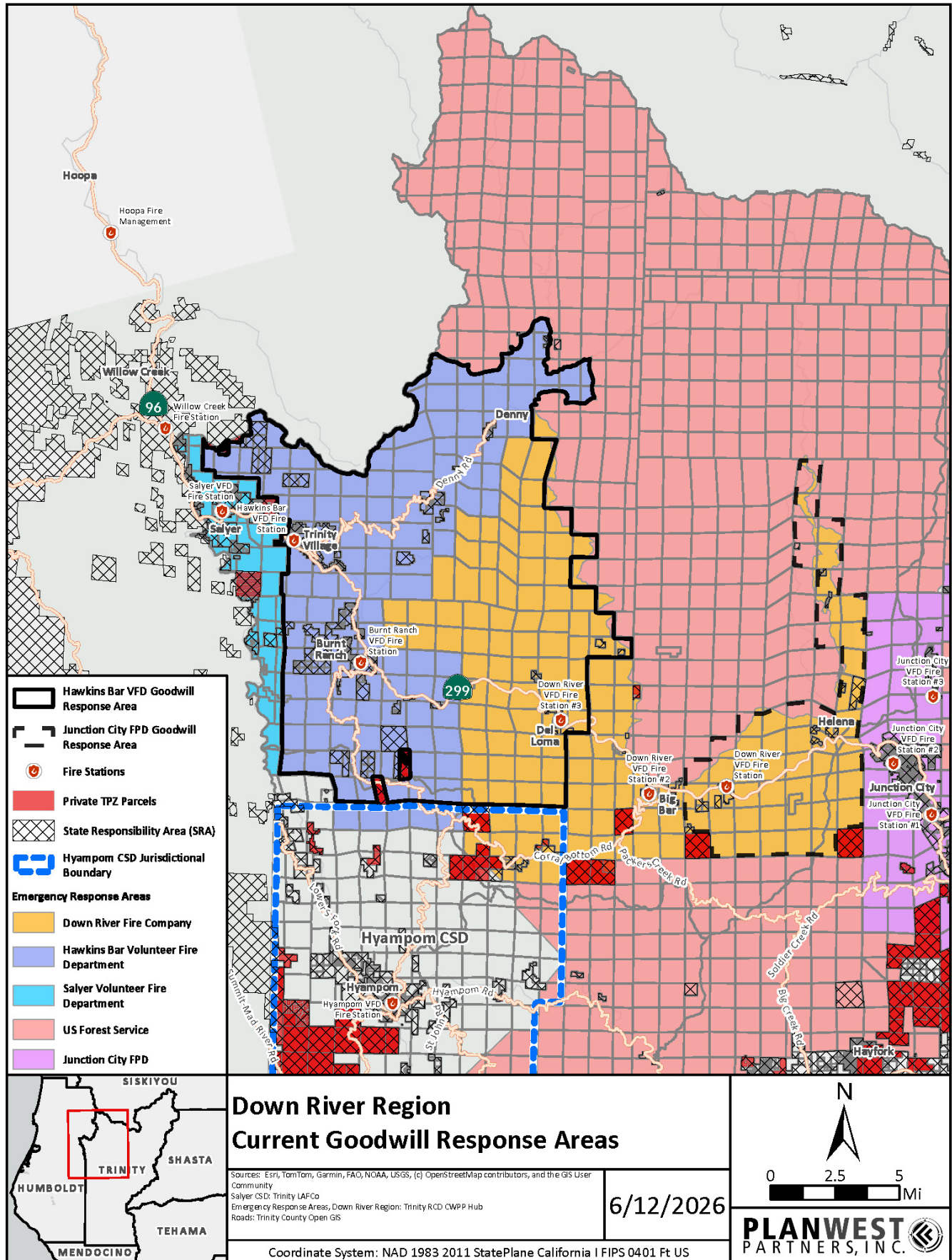
Of the agencies evaluated in this study, Salyer CSD is uniquely positioned to serve as a platform for future regionalization efforts. Unlike Hawkins Bar VFD and Down River VFD, Salyer CSD is an established special district with an elected governing board, taxing authority, and a dedicated revenue source to support fire protection services. Expansion of Salyer CSD's boundaries through annexation, coupled with the operational integration of existing volunteer departments as battalions or stations within a regional service delivery model, could provide a mechanism for extending stable governance, funding, and administrative support to neighboring communities that currently rely primarily on donations, grants, and fundraising activities.

Salyer CSD currently levies a voter-approved special tax of \$100 per improved parcel and \$50 per unimproved parcel within its jurisdictional boundaries. The District is actively evaluating a potential increase to the special tax to address growing operational and capital needs, as the tax has not been increased for nearly three decades. Given the regional governance and annexation opportunities identified in this study, it is recommended that the District evaluate any proposed special tax increase with future regional service delivery needs in mind, including the potential annexation and consolidation of neighboring service areas.

Annexation of portions of the Hawkins Bar and Down River service areas into Salyer CSD would provide a long-term, community-based, and locally controlled funding mechanism to support the sustainable delivery of fire protection services throughout a larger regional service area. In contrast to the current reliance on donations and periodic grant funding, annexation would allow the District to generate predictable annual revenue to support coordinated volunteer recruitment and retention, administration, training, apparatus replacement, facility maintenance, and emergency response operations.

In addition to providing a stable funding source, annexation would establish clear service responsibilities and accountability within a defined jurisdictional boundary. This would better align governance and funding mechanisms with actual service delivery patterns, which currently rely heavily on informal goodwill responses among neighboring fire service providers.

Figure 3-1: Current Goodwill Response Areas in Down River Region



A practical intermediate step may be the development of a shared fire chief arrangement between Salyer CSD and Hawkins Bar VFD. Agency representatives have expressed interest in succession planning and reducing administrative burdens associated with operating independent organizations. Salyer CSD's current chief has indicated a desire to retire in the foreseeable future, while Hawkins Bar VFD currently maintains leadership capacity that could potentially support a broader regional role. A shared chief arrangement could improve operational coordination, training consistency, and grant coordination while pursuing a formal boundary change.

Over time, this shared management approach could serve as a foundation for a more formal consolidation effort. Consolidation under an existing district structure would eliminate duplication of administrative responsibilities, provide access to a stable revenue source, improve long-term succession planning, and better align governance boundaries with actual service delivery patterns. Unlike formation of a new district, consolidation with Salyer CSD would build upon an existing governmental framework and funding mechanism rather than creating an additional public agency with separate governance and administrative obligations.

Annexation Process

Pursuant to Government Code §57330, territory annexed into a special district may become subject to an existing voter-approved special tax following completion of the annexation proceedings and satisfaction of applicable statutory requirements. As a result, annexation would allow Salyer CSD's voter-approved special tax and associated funding framework, as adopted by District voters and in effect at the time of annexation, to be extended into the annexed territory, providing a more sustainable financial foundation for fire protection services than currently exists within much of the Down River region.

Any proposal to annex territory into Salyer CSD would be subject to the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000 and would require review and approval by Trinity LAFCo. The annexation process contains multiple procedural safeguards to ensure public participation and protect the rights of affected landowners and registered voters.

LAFCo Application and Public Hearing. The annexation proposal would require submission of a formal application to LAFCo, including a Plan for Services and supporting materials. LAFCo would provide public notice and conduct a public hearing to evaluate the proposal and receive comments from affected residents, landowners, agencies, and other interested parties.

Protest Hearing. If LAFCo approves the annexation, a subsequent protest hearing must be conducted unless waived. Notice of the protest hearing would be provided to affected landowners and registered voters within the annexation area. Written protests may be submitted before or during the hearing by those who oppose the proposed annexation. Because annexation would result in the annexed territory becoming subject to the District's voter-approved special tax, residents who oppose inclusion within the District may express that opposition through the protest process.

Protest Thresholds Established by State Law. State law establishes specific protest thresholds that determine whether an annexation may proceed:

- **Less than 25 percent protest.** If written protests are received from fewer than 25 percent of registered voters and fewer than 25 percent of landowners (both by number and assessed value), LAFCo may complete the annexation without an election.
- **25 percent to 50 percent protest.** If written protests are received from 25 percent or more, but less than 50 percent, of either registered voters or landowners, LAFCo must order an annexation election within the affected territory pursuant to Government Code Section 57091.
- **50 percent or greater protest.** If written protests are received from 50 percent or more of registered voters residing within the annexation area, LAFCo must terminate the annexation proceedings.
- **Effect of Termination.** If the annexation is terminated through the protest process, the territory would remain outside the District and would not become subject to the District's special tax. Any approved special tax would continue to apply only within the existing District boundaries.

These statutory safeguards ensure that any future annexation occurs through a transparent public process and only with sufficient community support.

Evaluation of Governance Restructuring Alternatives

Salyer CSD's existing special tax, as well as any potential future increase currently under consideration by the District, was used as a model to evaluate the potential financial implications of governance restructuring within the Down River Region (Table 3-3). Down River VFD and Hawkins Bar VFD currently rely primarily on community donations, grants, and fundraising activities to support operations. By comparison, Salyer CSD benefits from a voter-approved special tax that provides a more stable and predictable source of revenue for fire protection services.

While the special tax revenue estimates are approximations, they provide useful context for assessing the feasibility of governance restructuring, whether that is through annexation or district formation. The analysis demonstrates that extending a district-based funding structure into areas currently served by volunteer organizations could modestly increase the amount of locally controlled revenue available to support fire protection and emergency response services.

Table 3-3: Special Tax Analysis on Restructuring Options¹²

	Salyer CSD Existing Boundary	Option A Salyer CSD Annexing to Del Loma	Option B Salyer CSD Annexing to Big Bar	Option C Hawkins Bar Special District Formation
Existing Tax (\$50/unimproved, \$100/improved)	\$33,100.00	\$91,900.00	\$101,000.00	\$58,800.00
Increased Tax (\$100/unimproved, \$150 improved)	\$51,570.00	\$143,370.00	\$157,720.00	\$91,800.00

¹² Note: Tax calculations are approximations and cannot be guaranteed. Final tax allocation would be determined through collaboration with the County Auditor's Office

Based on stakeholder discussions, existing service delivery patterns, and current organizational capacities, LAFCo has identified three primary options for governance restructuring opportunities in the Down River region. These options are displayed below (Figure 3-2, Figure 3-3, Figure 3-4). The proposed maps depict agency jurisdictional boundaries, spheres of influence (SOIs), and goodwill response areas to illustrate potential service responsibilities and governance structures under each alternative. The SOIs shown are intended to serve as a preliminary plan for future reorganizations and boundary changes that may be considered by LAFCo and affected agencies over time.

Option A - Salyer CSD Annexation to Del Loma. Annexation of lands east of the District's current boundary and west of Del Loma. This option could provide up to approximately \$92,000 under Salyer CSD's current special tax, or up to approximately \$144,000 if the tax was increased by \$50 per parcel (see Table 3-3).

Option B - Salyer CSD Annexation to Big Bar. Annexation of lands east of the District's current boundary and west of Big Bar. This option could provide up to approximately \$101,000 under Salyer CSD's current special tax, or up to approximately \$158,000 if the tax was increased by \$50 per parcel (see Table 3-3).

Option C - Hawkins Bar Fire Protection District Formation. Formation of a new fire protection district encompassing the existing Hawkins Bar VFD response area and extending east to include the Del Loma portion of the Down River VFD response area. Being a special district opens doors to access funding streams that are typically only available to local government entities, such as FPDs, including tax revenue and certain grant funding. Additionally, fire insurance is more difficult to obtain in rural areas. Being located within the boundaries of an FPD may benefit the ability to obtain fire insurance or keep current policies. Formation of the special district would be contingent upon establishment of a special tax, which could provide up to approximately \$92,000 in annual revenue to support the service provision of the district if the special tax followed the model set by Salyer CSD (see Table 3-3).

Options A and B would build upon an existing governmental structure, funding mechanism, and elected governing board, while Option C would establish a new special district with separate governance, administrative, and financial responsibilities. All three options would require community support, transfer of fire stations and apparatus, and completion of LAFCO proceedings.

Under all three options, Junction City FPD would continue to provide mutual aid on a goodwill basis west of its boundary within the Down River VFD mapped response area where service demands and travel distances support continued regional cooperation.

The maps that follow identify jurisdictional boundaries and goodwill response areas for planning purposes and to facilitate future discussions regarding service responsibility, governance restructuring, and funding opportunities within the region.

- Agency Jurisdictional Boundary - this shows the official boundary of an established agency where they are able to implement ordinances and collect special taxes and/or assessments.
- SOI - the plan for the probable physical boundaries and service areas of a local agency, as determined by the Commission.

- Goodwill Response Area - an area outside of an agency's jurisdictional boundary where they are not obligated to provide services, but where they will still respond to calls when possible.

These maps are intended as a planning tool and do not establish service obligations or governance changes. Special taxes may only be collected from areas within an agency's jurisdictional boundary and cannot be applied to the SOI or goodwill response area.

Figure 3-2: Option A - Salyer CSD Annexation out to Del Loma

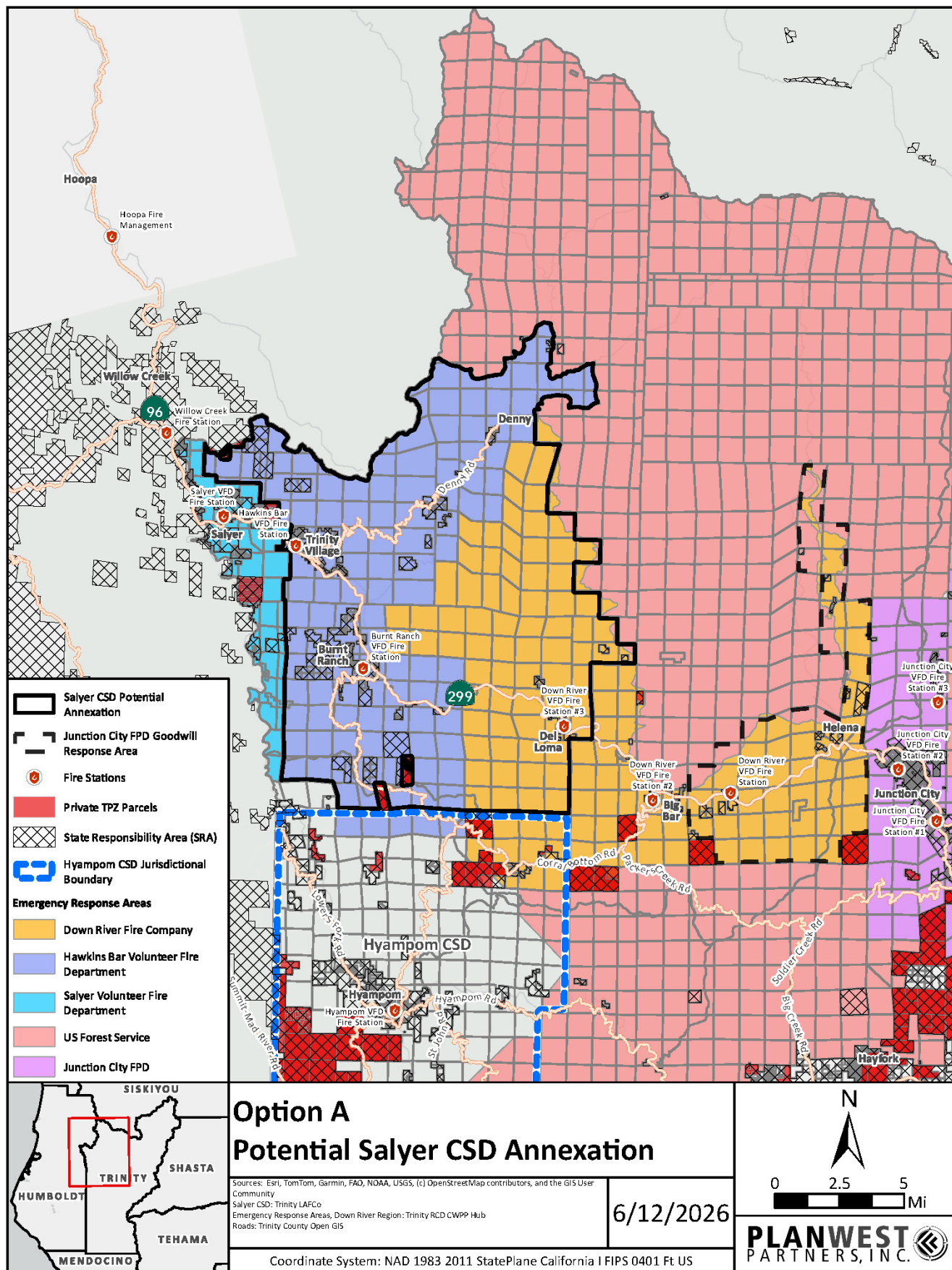


Figure 3-3: Option B - Salyer CSD Annexation out to Big Bar

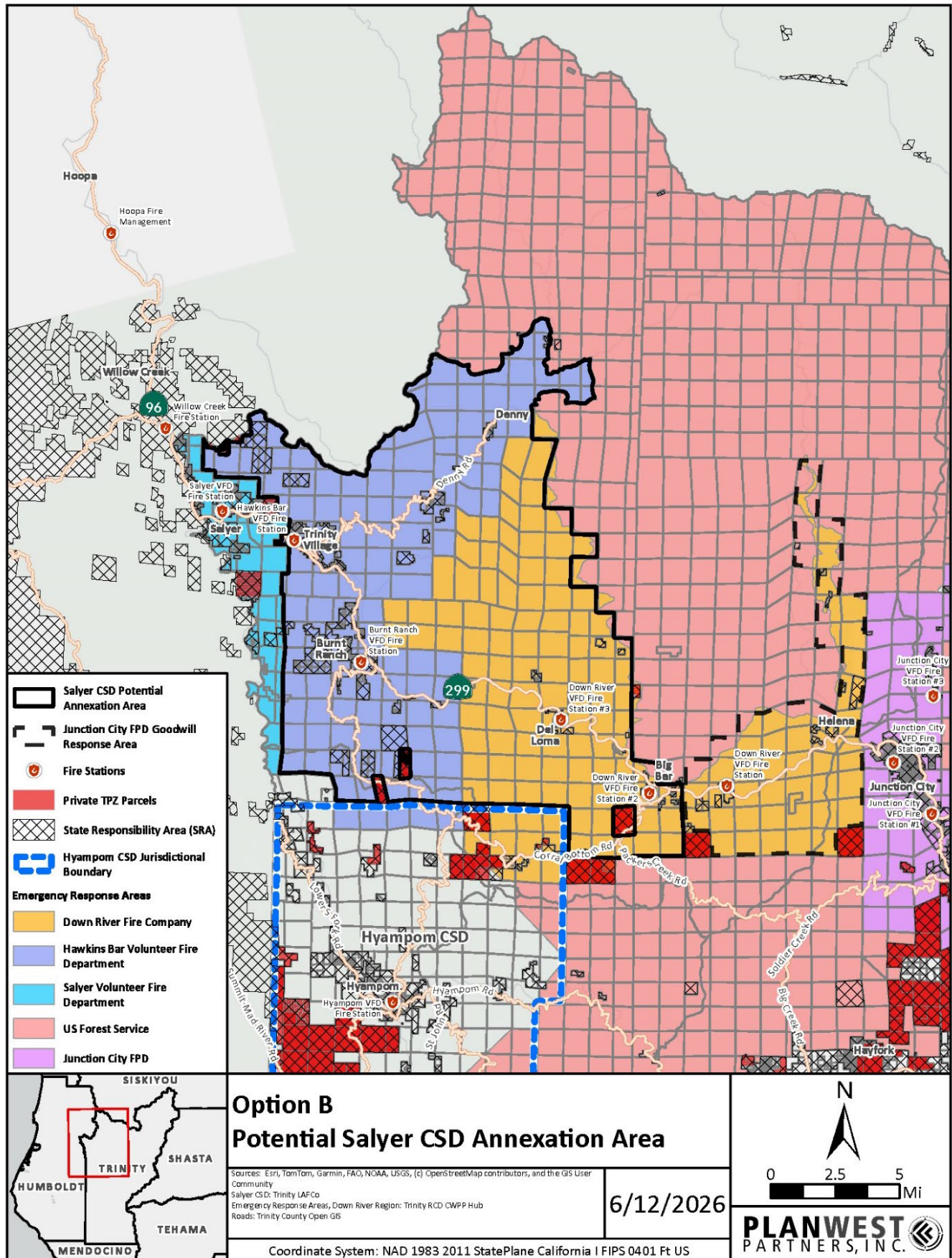


Figure 3-4: Option C - Special District Formation

