

The Mono County Pack Fire

Emergency Communication Issues

November 13, 2025



Foreword

The Mono County Grand Jury is an official judicial body with independent authority that is not answerable to administrators or legislatures. The Civil Grand Jury is an investigative body created to ensure that the best interests of all citizens of the County are being served legally and effectively by local government including all the departments, agencies, and special districts that are under the purview of Mono County government and the Town of Mammoth Lakes.

Summary

CBS News breaking news headline: Pack Fire explodes in Mono County, California forcing evacuations amid a backdrop described as apocalyptic.

On November 13, 2025, Mono County experienced a storm, a firestorm. The fire started near the communities of McGee Creek and Crowley Lake at approximately 11:15 AM. What could have been a relatively easily contained brush fire, wasn't. Almost simultaneously with the breakout of the fire the winds picked up, increasing to gale force (over 50 mph) just below hurricane force level. The fire spread from 1 acre to 10 acres, then to 1000 acres in an incredibly short time frame. The high winds grounded aerial firefighting resources. The Pack Fire graduated from a brush fire to a conflagration, a fire that attains extremely high heat of such intensity that it creates its own wind system. The prevailing wind gusts of 50 mph, combined with the additional wind from the developing firestorm, were pushing a wall of flames, intense heat, and dense smoke towards the 500 plus homes and residents of the McGee Creek and Crowley Lake communities.

The Grand Jury initiated this investigation in response to a letter of concern regarding the impact of the Mono County Dispatch Department's role in the initial Pack Fire response communications. The letter of concern indicated possible delays in dispatching the appropriate agencies in a coordinated protocol.

During the course of the investigation, it became evident that the concerns raised extended beyond a single incident and reflected broader systemic issues within Mono County's emergency dispatch system. Based on interviews with key stakeholders and review of available documents, the Grand Jury finds that the current dispatch system is constrained by structural, technological, and organizational limitations. These limitations impact staffing, training, communication, and overall system reliability.

While the Pack Fire highlighted certain deficiencies, the Grand Jury finds that the underlying issues are systemic and not attributable to any single event or individual.

Methodology

Documents

- Mono County Dispatch Pack Fire 911 Radio Traffic Recording
- Mono County Dispatch Pack Fire Digital Call Log
- Mono County Dispatch Pack Fire Audio Call Log Recorder
- United States Forest Service (USFS) Pack Fire After Action Report (April 6, 2026)
- Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Dispatch Training Manual
- Mono County Dispatch Policy Manual (Policy 800)
- Mammoth Times Report on Crowley Lake Town Hall Meeting
(November 19, 2025)
- U.S. Report by CBS News (November 14, 2025)
- Cal Fire Final Pack Fire Incident Report
- Regional Dispatch Feasibility Study and Implementation Plan (December 17, 2020)

Interviews

The Grand Jury conducted six interviews with representatives from multiple public safety agencies, including law enforcement and fire services. Interviewees included leadership personnel with extensive operational experience in Mono County.

Site Visits

- Mono County Sheriff Dispatch Center, Bridgeport, CA
- Pack Fire fire site, McGee Creek, CA

Background

Emergency dispatching is the lifeblood of a critical incident. Dispatchers are the first point of public contact in receiving 911 calls regarding emergencies requiring fire departments, law enforcement, medical assistance, safety hazard mitigation and other miscellaneous requests for service. Sometimes these entities are dispatched individually, other times all are needed. Dispatchers are responsible for facilitating appropriate and timely field unit responses, monitoring incident activity, and providing information that is critical to both citizens and units on the scene.

The following agencies were involved in the initial stages of the Pack Fire:

- Long Valley Fire Department
- Mammoth Lakes Fire Department
- Mono County Sheriff Department
- Mono County Sheriff Search and Rescue
- Mammoth Lakes Police Department
- USFS Fire Department
- USFS law enforcement
- Bureau of Land Management
- California Highway Patrol
- Bishop Fire Department
- Bishop Police Department
- Mono County EMS
- June Lake Fire Department
- Lee Vining Fire Department
- Mono City Fire Department

- Paradise Fire Department
- Wheeler Crest Fire Department
- Bridgeport Fire Department
- Antelope Valley Fire Department
- Southern California Edison

In total, the Pack Fire response involved 795 personnel, 58 fire engines, 6 water tenders, 5 bulldozers, 27 Hand Crews, Mono County Search and Rescue, law enforcement officers from 5 agencies, and Mono County EMS units. The Pack Fire involved two fronts: fire units fighting the fire, saving what structures they could while keeping the fire at bay to facilitate the second front's endeavor, and law enforcement and search and rescue personnel, who were tasked with evacuating 1,800 residents from the communities of McGee Creek, Crowley Lake, and Long Valley.

The three dispatchers were 50 miles away in a room, in a building with no visual input of the fire scene. Initially, with no idea of the severity of the fire, dispatchers only input was from the first on scene unit. Dealing with spotty communication and incomplete information, the dispatchers were not in a position to immediately make the decision to call in every possible available agency, although that is exactly what was needed.

Just the previous night, a fire was reported on National Forest land in a location not far from McGee Creek. The Long Valley Fire Department was dispatched and able to extinguish the bulk of the fire until relieved by the USFS Fire Department. The USFS proceeded to finish the extinguishment and overhaul the area to ensure there were no lingering hot spots. The USFS remained on scene overnight on fire watch.

Discussion

Mono County operates a central dispatch system located in Bridgeport, CA serving law enforcement, Fire, Emergency Medical Services and miscellaneous Emergency Responders.

Mono County dispatch personnel are assigned dual roles, functioning as dispatchers and as correctional (jailer) staff. This is not an ideal situation. Each of these positions requires skills, training, experience and responsibilities that do not overlap. There is a level of professionalism demanded by the roles of each position that requires full-time attention.

Recruitment and retention of qualified correctional officers/dispatchers is difficult particularly due to geographic location and the dual role job structure. Correctional officer/dispatch staffing experiences turnover, resulting in loss of institutional knowledge and training continuity.

Mono County Sheriff Dispatch personnel training is limited and may not meet the standards observed in larger or more specialized agencies. Also, they do not have comprehensive situation-specific operational protocols or quick reference guides for varied emergency scenarios.

Mono County is seriously exploring a regional dispatch model with Inyo County. Stakeholders identified potential opportunities for future dispatch infrastructure development near the Mammoth/Yosemite Airport due to geographic location, workforce access, and existing or potential public safety infrastructure in the area. Cal Fire is opening a fully manned fire station at the airport this summer.

The Grand Jury's investigation revealed that concerns regarding the Pack Fire response are part of broader systemic challenges within Mono County's Emergency Services framework.

Testimony from multiple stakeholders indicates that the County's dispatch system operates under significant structural and resource constraints. These include limited staffing, turnover, dual role responsibilities, limited training, and lack of detailed situation-specific procedures or quick reference materials. Collectively, these conditions affect the consistency and reliability of dispatch operations.

The Grand Jury also received testimony that dispatch personnel have limited opportunities for exposure to higher volume dispatch environments. Multiple interviewees noted that larger agencies may provide more structured operational models, training systems, and incident exposure than are available locally.

At the same time, the Grand Jury heard consistent testimony that dispatch is only one component of a larger emergency response system that includes law enforcement, fire services, emergency medical services, communications infrastructure, and intra-agency coordination. Deficiencies in any one of these areas may impact overall response effectiveness.

With respect to the Pack Fire, the Grand Jury finds that while dispatch performance raised concerns among stakeholders, other factors including resource availability, communication challenges in the field, and operational decision making also contributed to the outcome. The evidence does not support a conclusion that dispatch alone was determinative.

The Grand Jury also notes that Mono County faces challenges common to rural jurisdictions including limited economies of scale, geographic constraints, and funding limitations. These factors complicate efforts to recruit and retain qualified personnel and to maintain modern emergency response systems.

The Grand Jury finds that the County needs a unified short, medium, and long-term strategy for dispatch and emergency communications. Existing structures appear fragmented, with responsibilities distributed across multiple entities without a comprehensive system design.

The Grand Jury further notes that stakeholders identified potential for future dispatch infrastructure development near the Mammoth/Yosemite Airport. Interviewees noted that the area may provide operational advantages, including improved access from US Highway 395 during winter conditions, proximity to the County's primary workforce population center, and possible future public safety infrastructure development in the area.

Accordingly, the Grand Jury's recommendations focus on structural improvements, modernization of infrastructure, enhancement of training and operational procedures, and development of a more coordinated and sustainable approach to emergency dispatch services.

Findings

F1. The cause of the Pack Fire is still under investigation by the USFS. The previous night's fire, the Magee Fire, and the Pack Fire are declared separate incidents by the USFS.

F2. There is no set protocol for the first Mono County arriving fire unit to notify dispatch of how many additional resources need to be dispatched immediately.

F3. There is no set protocol to notify all the fire departments and law enforcement agencies that there is a large working fire or other significant disaster in the County. This would be a notification call, not a dispatch.

F4. There is no set policy and procedure for dispatch to track and account for all departments and agencies that are on scene at the initial stages of an incident.

F5. Training and professional development are insufficient to support system demands. Limited training, dual role positions and limited exposure to higher volume dispatch environments contribute to variability in dispatch performance and system reliability. The lack of comprehensive situation specific procedures for quick reference materials may further limit operational consistency during critical incidents.

F6. The current dispatch structure is not optimized for effective emergency communication. The dual role requirement for dispatch personnel divides focus between corrections and dispatch responsibilities, reducing specialization and operational effectiveness. This may also contribute to recruitment difficulties by way of narrowing the applicant pool to only those persons interested in performing both functions.

F7. Geographic location contributes to persistent staffing challenges. The placement of the dispatch center in Bridgeport limits access to a broader workforce, particularly compared to population centers such as the Mammoth Lakes area.

F8. Dispatch deficiencies are part of a broader, under-resourced emergency response system. Evidence indicates that dispatch performance issues are intertwined with larger systemic limitations including staffing, communications, and interagency coordination.

F9. The Pack Fire response does not appear to be solely attributable to dispatch performance. While dispatch related concerns were identified, multiple factors - resource limitations,

communication challenges, and operational decision making - contributed to the overall incident response.

F10. While the County has a short-term, midterm, and long-term strategy for emergency communications and dispatch, the current structure and planning efforts are fragmented and do not reflect a comprehensive system design.

F11. The County contracted a private firm, Federal Engineering, to conduct a Regional Dispatch Feasibility Study and Implementation Plan. A 120-page detailed and comprehensive document was submitted in 2020. This document covered every aspect of establishing a state of the art professional Dispatch Center. The concept was initially well received by both Mono and Inyo Counties, however, COVID-19 issues stymied the project.

F12. The Dispatch Department has recently been under the leadership of new management. The new manager is progressive and proactive. New higher training standards are being implemented, including tactical dispatch, active shooter and emergency medical training (telephone CPR instructions). Also, dispatch personnel are being sent to agencies with higher call loads to observe, train, and shadow operations in higher volume emergency communication centers. Such exposure will improve familiarity with larger scale incident management, operational workflows, and standardized dispatch practices.

F13. The Pack Fire resulted in no fatalities or serious injuries to any residents. This, despite 30 structures completely destroyed and 6 others partially destroyed. On January 7th, 2025, the combined Palisades and Eaton Fires, even with the virtually unlimited resources of LA County, resulted in 28 fatalities.

Mono County Grand Jury Commentary:

Despite Mono County's lack of state of the art communications, logistical span of control issues, and emergency procedure protocols, the men and women of all the first responding departments and agencies, including the Dispatch Department, rose to the occasion. A commendation of extreme valor to everyone involved in reducing the impact of this disaster does not do justice to the scope of the valiant efforts put forth for the 24/7 days of physical and mental effort the County and Public Safety partners endured.

Recommendations

R1. Establish a set protocol for the first arriving fire unit to notify dispatch as to how many additional resources need to be dispatched immediately. This could be in the form of a 2nd alarm, 3rd alarm, 4th alarm, 5th alarm notification in the initial radio communication from fire unit to dispatch. With the known geographic location and the call for a 3rd alarm assignment, dispatch would have a call out list and could immediately dispatch the appropriate fire units and other designated resources.

R2. Establish a set protocol to notify all the fire departments and law enforcement agencies that there is a large working fire or other significant disaster in the County. This would be a notification, not a dispatch. This would give the Volunteer Fire Departments and law enforcement agencies advance notice of a possible dispatch.

R3. Establish a policy and procedure for dispatch to track and account for all departments and agencies that are on scene at the initial stages of an incident. Once the Unified Command is set up and running, this information could be relayed to them. Unified Command could then take over this function.

R4. Establish written situation-specific procedures including quick reference materials that dispatchers can utilize in their decision making process for critical incidents and emergency scenarios.

R5. Establish Dispatch as a stand alone professional function. The County could separate dispatch responsibilities from corrections duties to improve recruitment, retention, and performance. Consider lateral hiring of dispatchers from other agencies or those with prior training and experience.

R6. Evaluate relocation of the primary dispatch center. Even given the lack of continued participation of Inyo County, a feasibility study could be conducted regarding placement of a future primary dispatch center closer to population centers such as Bishop and Mammoth Lakes.

Several potential advantages associated with the airport area include:

- Proximity to the County's primary workforce population centers.
- Immediate access from US Highway 395, including during winter conditions.
- Potential coordination with future public safety infrastructure development in the area.

R7. In addition to sending current dispatch personnel to train at higher volume emergency communication centers, consideration could be given to combining this field training concept to the initial POST dispatch training in Riverside or San Bernardino.

R8. Even if Inyo County is not willing to participate with the regional dispatch approach, many of the concepts and procedures formulated in the Fire Engineering, 120-page, Regional Dispatch Feasibility Study and Implementation plan can be utilized in restructuring of the Mono County Dispatch Program.

Required Responses

Penal Code governs response content. Penal Code Section 933.05(a) requires that for each relevant finding the respondent must give one of two possible responses:

1. Agrees with the Finding; or
2. Disagrees wholly or partly with the finding, with an explanation of the reasons for the disagreement.

For each relevant Recommendation, the respondent is required to select one of the four possible responses per Penal Code 933.05(b):

1. The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary of the action taken; or
2. The recommendation will be implemented, with a time frame for implementation; or
3. The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope of the analysis, and a time frame for further discussion of up to six months from the release of this report; or
4. The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation.

Required Respondents

Sheriff Ingrid Braun shall respond to findings F1-F13 and Recommendations R1-R8 within 60 days of the date of this report.

The Mono County Board of Supervisors shall respond to findings F6-F13 and Recommendations R5-R7 within 90 days of the date of this report.