



SANTA CRUZ  
COUNTY  
GRAND JURY

Grand Jury <grandjury@scgrandjury.org>

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## Board of Supervisors Response to Grand Jury Report "Victims of the CZU Wildfire..."

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Caitlin Smith <Caitlin.Smith@santacruzcountyca.gov>

Tue, Sep 10, 2024 at 3:09 PM

Good Afternoon,

Please see attached for the Board of Supervisors' response to the 2023-2024 Grand Jury Report "Victims of the CZU Wildfire – Four Years Later."

Best,

Caitlin C. Smith

County Supervisors' Analyst

Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors

[701 Ocean Street, Room 500](#)

[Santa Cruz, CA 95060](#)

831-454-2200 main

831-454-3516 direct


[caitlin.smith@santacruzcountyca.gov](mailto:caitlin.smith@santacruzcountyca.gov)

To email all five members of the Board of Supervisors at once,

please use: [boardofsupervisors@santacruzcountyca.gov](mailto:boardofsupervisors@santacruzcountyca.gov)

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### 2 attachments

 **Cover Letter Victims of CZU Wildfire.pdf**  
195K

 **Response to Grand Jury report Victims of the CZU Wildfire - Four Years Later.pdf**  
490K



# County of Santa Cruz

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## BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

701 OCEAN STREET, SUITE 500, SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060-4069  
(831) 454-2200 FAX: (831) 454-3262 TDD/TTY - Call 711

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**BRUCE MCPHERSON**  
FIFTH DISTRICT

September 10, 2024

The Honorable Katherine Hansen  
Santa Cruz Courthouse  
701 Ocean Street  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Dear Judge Hansen,

The purpose of this letter is to formally transmit the Board of Supervisors' response to the 2023-2024 Grand Jury Report "Victims of the CZU Wildfire – Four Years Later."

Sincerely,

JUSTIN CUMMINGS, Chair  
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors

JC:cs  
Attachments

CC: Clerk of the Board  
Santa Cruz County Grand Jury



The 2023–2024 Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury  
Requires the

**Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors**

to Respond by September 19, 2024

to the Findings and Recommendations listed below  
which were assigned to them in the report titled

**Victims of the CZU Wildfire – Four Years Later**

**The Flame Still Burns**

Responses are **required** from elected officials, elected agency or department heads, and elected boards, councils, and committees which are investigated by the Grand Jury. The California Penal Code (PC) [§933\(c\)](#) requires you to respond as specified below and to keep your response on file.

Your response will be considered **compliant** under [PC §933.05](#) if it contains an appropriate comment on **all** findings and recommendations **which were assigned to you** in this report.

Please follow the instructions below when preparing your response.

## Instructions for Respondents

Your assigned [Findings](#) and [Recommendations](#) are listed on the following pages with check boxes and an expandable space for summaries, timeframes, and explanations. Please follow these instructions, which paraphrase [PC §933.05](#):

1. **For the Findings, mark one of the following responses with an “X” and provide the required additional information:**
  - a. **AGREE with the Finding**, or
  - b. **PARTIALLY DISAGREE with the Finding** – specify the portion of the Finding that is disputed and include an explanation of the reasons why, or
  - c. **DISAGREE with the Finding** – provide an explanation of the reasons why.
2. **For the Recommendations, mark one of the following actions with an “X” and provide the required additional information:**
  - a. **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – provide a summary of the action taken, or
  - b. **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – provide a timeframe or expected date for completion, or
  - c. **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – provide an explanation, scope, and parameters of an analysis to be completed within six months, or
  - d. **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – provide an explanation of why it is not warranted or not reasonable.
3. **Please confirm the date on which you approved the assigned responses:**

We approved these responses in a regular public meeting as shown  
in our minutes dated September 10, 2024.

4. **When your responses are complete, please email your completed Response Request as a PDF file attachment to both**

The Honorable Katherine Hansen, Grand Jury Supervising Judge  
[Katherine.Hansen@santacruzcourt.org](mailto:Katherine.Hansen@santacruzcourt.org) and

The Santa Cruz County Grand Jury [grandjury@scgrandjury.org](mailto:grandjury@scgrandjury.org).

**If you have questions about this request form, please contact the Grand Jury by calling 831-454-2099 or by sending an email to [grandjury@scgrandjury.org](mailto:grandjury@scgrandjury.org).**

## Findings

- F1.** The inability of local fire departments to coordinate (communicate) with CAL FIRE during their initial response to the CZU Fire caused many fire victims to unnecessarily lose their homes and possibly contributed to the loss of a life.

**AGREE**

**PARTIALLY DISAGREE**

**DISAGREE**

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The ability for local fire departments and CALFIRE to communicate during operations was in place at the time and continued for the duration of the CZU Fire through unified incident command, which included the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, San Mateo County Sheriff's Office, Felton Fire Protection District, Santa Cruz County Fire Department, San Mateo County Fire Department, Boulder Creek Fire Department and the Ben Lomond Fire Protection District. These agencies operated using long-established unified command principles including coordination and communication.

**F2.** The Long-term Recovery Group which assisted CZU fire and other disaster victims with case management and food and housing support serves as a model for the future.

**AGREE**

**PARTIALLY DISAGREE**

**DISAGREE**

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The County, and Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience (OR3) see the value in a strong, well organized and resourced VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Assisting in Disaster) and a Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) is supporting all phases of disaster from preparedness to response, short term recovery and long-term recovery.

**F3.** Because many CZU fire victims were unaware of LTRG disaster services, fire victims, to their detriment, did not make use of the services and/or available financial assistance.

- AGREE**
- PARTIALLY DISAGREE**
- DISAGREE**

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

Communications to fire victim families included regular newsletters from the OR3, community meetings and in-person resource sharing events, outreach from the Board of Supervisor offices whose districts were affected, and digital surveys to learn more about victims' experiences and share resource information. More can and will be done following future disasters to increase communications. A key learning from the CZU recovery has been the recognition that residents impacted by disaster are able to receive information and integrate resources into their recovery journey at different timelines and stages.

**F4.** The failure of County agencies to have an effective disaster response plan in place prior to the CZU Fire caused many fire victims to incur unnecessary expense in the rebuilding process.

- AGREE**
- PARTIALLY DISAGREE**
- DISAGREE**

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The rebuild plan and procedures were established well in advance of the completion of the state's debris removal process, which is the essential first step. The county finalized its contract with 4 Leaf in November 2020, ahead of the debris removal effort's conclusion. Within two weeks of signing the contract, the Recovery Permit Center was opened to the public on November 30, 2020, where telephone assistance and walk in appointments are available during business hours Monday through Friday. Further, the Preclearance and Building Permit submittal and review processes were established and fully operational as of November 30, 2020. The fire affected 697 parcels with dwellings. To date, 113 replacement dwellings have been constructed and finalized and another 142 are permitted or under construction, for an overall rebuild percentage of 37%. In addition, 360 Environmental Health Pre-Clearances have been approved (out of the 478 submitted), representing a 75% approval rate.



**F5.** The failure of CDI and Environmental Health to provide timely guidance with respect to applying for and obtaining required permits after the CZU Fire caused many fire victims to expend unnecessary time and expense in the rebuild permitting process.

**AGREE**

**PARTIALLY DISAGREE**

**DISAGREE**

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The rebuild plan and procedures were established well in advance of the completion of the state's debris removal process, the essential first step before any site investigations or permitting activity could take place. The county finalized its contract with 4 Leaf in November 2020, prior to the conclusion of the debris removal efforts. Within two weeks of executing the contract, the Recovery Permit Center (RPC) was opened to the public on November 30, 2020, and the RPC website was launched with information regarding the steps to obtain an expedited building permit. At that time, the Environmental Health Preclearance and Building Permit submittal and review processes became fully operational. The [RPC website](#) provides links to informational and guidance documents outlining rebuild parameters related to water and septic requirements for property owners.

**F6.** The failure of the County Environmental Health department to fully inform CZU fire victims about new state septic system regulations (LAMP) resulted in many fire victims abandoning their plans to rebuild after realizing how high the cost of meeting the new standards would be.

- AGREE**
- PARTIALLY DISAGREE**
- DISAGREE**

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The expedited re-build permit process was built on the first step of obtaining “pre-clearances” to ensure rebuilders were able to fully understand the scope of work and financial impact of meeting state-approved requirements for septic systems early in the process and could make informed decisions. In some cases, un-permitted additions or unauthorized septic system augmentation prior to the fire resulted in rebuilders being unable to permit their pre-existing home size and bedroom count without incurring significant expenses related to upgraded systems required to support the size of the rebuild. The Recovery Permit Center staff spent considerable time and resources working with applicants to problem-solve; many were able to scale their home size back to what was legally permitted prior to the fire to avoid the increased cost, while others chose to abandon their plans entirely.

## Recommendations

**R1.** The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Cruz County Office of Response, Recovery and Resilience enter into a public-private partnership with the Long Term Recovery Group to provide continuing assistance and support for current and future disaster victims. This should be done by December 31, 2024. (F2, F3)

**HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done

**HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe

**REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)

**WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

### Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

OR3 is supporting the LTRG with direct funding through their FY24/25 budget appropriations as well as integrating additional funding support into annual federal emergency preparedness and response grants.

**R2.** The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury recommends that OR3, CDI, and Santa Cruz County Environmental Health collaborate in developing a plan for an expedited rebuild process for future disaster victims. This should be done by December 31, 2024. (F5, F6)

**HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done

**HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe

**REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)

**WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

**Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:**

The County has found the pre-clearance process for rebuilding after the CZU fire disaster to successful. However, each disaster is unique and may require different rebuild processes to efficiently respond.

**R3.** The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury recommends that OR3 provide a list of all victims of the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, as well as lists of victims of any future disasters, to the LTRG to simplify outreach to victims. This should be done by September 1, 2024. (F2, F3)

- HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)
- WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

**Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:**

Resident's contact information who have engaged with the Recovery Permit Center but have not pulled a building permit or completed their home is being provided to the LTRG. In future federal disasters, where disaster case management resources are funded, the LTRG and OR3 along with other participating disaster case management organizations will renew our Personal Identifying Information (PII) agreements with FEMA and each other to ensure the ability to share PII information in support of overall recovery and resource support.

**R4.** The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury further recommends that the Board of Supervisors work with CAL FIRE to develop clear collaboration between local firefighting agencies and CAL FIRE. The community at large should then be advised as to this line of command. This should be done by December 31, 2024. (F1, F4)

**HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done

**HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe

**REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)

**WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

**Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:**

CALFIRE and Local Government Fire agencies are constantly in collaboration within Santa Cruz County. An example of this shared responsibility/collaboration is the role of Operational Area Coordinator (OAC). This is shared between CZU CALFIRE and two local government fire agencies.