

Bureaucracy at work

A tiny, taxpayer-funded mosquito district may be inefficient, but it isn't going away anytime soon

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This is a story of local bureaucracy. The characters are both powerful and powerless, both bogged down by the system and buoyed by it. Mostly it's a story of an entity started nearly 100 years ago that, while it may be inefficient, nobody will take responsibility for. This is the story of the Oroville Mosquito Abatement District.

In the far corner of the Oroville Maintenance Yard on Mitchell Avenue downtown rests a small storage area with an even smaller office that is the home of the Oroville Mosquito Abatement District. Inside sits Jeff Cahn, who has been the district's manager for 11 years. He is surprised to have a visitor, but kindly offers a chair to this reporter while explaining the ins and outs of his job.

Cahn is a friendly man with a wide smile. He clearly enjoys his work, which includes monitoring and treating 12.7 square miles of mosquito territory. At his side is a "seasonal tech," Hugo Landaverde, who is preparing for the evening's fogging.

The CN&R had received an interesting tip a week or so prior to this visit. According to a concerned citizen, OMAD was essentially a one-man show, had little oversight and might be inefficient.

David Moench, who has doggedly pursued action by OMAD's board, is an interesting character, unafraid to speak his mind. He became interested in the Oroville district after a friend was allegedly wrongfully kicked off the board, he explained. If his name sounds familiar, it's because his brother, Dan Moench, is actually the assistant manager of the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District (BCMVCDD). He was not speaking on his brother's behalf, he insisted.

"Nobody's paying attention," Moench said. "Who's making decisions?"

This reporter decided to find out.



Jeff Cahn, manager of the Oroville Mosquito Abatement District, watches as Hugo Landaverde shuts off the valve pumping chemicals into one of the district's two foggers.

PHOTO BY MEREDITH J. COOPER

More from LAFCo:

To read LAFCo's entire review of the mosquito districts, log onto <http://buttelafco.org>, click on "Documents," then "Municipal Service Reviews," and finally "Final MSR: Mosquito Abatement Districts."

OMAD was created in 1916. It is one of three such districts in Butte County. The others are the BCMVCD, which formed in 1948, and another small entity in Durham, created in 1918.

Oroville's district comprises a small pocket of land, including downtown Oroville and Thermalito, with roughly 20,000 residents, while Durham's encompasses 64 square miles and about 3,500 residents. BCMVCD's area covers 1,867 square miles—including Hamilton City in Glenn County—and a population of 181,000 people.

Each district's budget is based on a percentage of the property tax on residents and businesses in their service areas. That percentage is based on a property's assessed value, equaling about \$13 for a home valued at \$100,000. On top of that, both Oroville and Durham collect a direct tax per parcel—approved by a public vote—equaling roughly \$25 a year in Durham and \$11 in Oroville.

In 2004, the Butte Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), which oversees service districts such as those mentioned above, did a [municipal-service review](#) on all three agencies. What it found was rather fascinating.

For one, starting in at least the 1970s, the Butte County Grand Jury has recommended consolidating the three districts.

“Both of these smaller Districts are historical in the County, but because of the irregularity of the boundaries it is believed to be in the best interest of the entire County to eventually have all mosquito abatement controlled from one central plant, the Butte County Mosquito Abatement District,” reads the Grand Jury's report in 1971. This was followed by similar recommendations in the coming years.

Yet nothing was ever done.

In 1979-80, the Grand Jury had this to say: “Until such time as the Oroville and Durham Mosquito Abatement Districts, either through their respective Boards of Directors or the people within their service areas actively seek inclusion in the larger Butte County Mosquito Abatement District, no further consideration should be given the matter. The question of merger is basically a local government decision.”

The Local Agency Formation Commission, or LAFCo, after wading through all this information, came to the conclusion that it makes sense on many levels to consolidate the districts. “... [T]he Commission determines that reorganizing the three districts into one county-wide district would provide numerous advantages and with little to no disadvantages,” LAFCo writes in its determination. It continues, “Regarding local accountability and governance ... Even though the Durham and Oroville districts hold a public meeting generally once a month, they both lack adequate access to the public.”

Adequate access to the public. That is precisely what piqued our interest in this subject. What exactly is OMAD? Does its manager get free rein? Is it still around basically because nobody wants to take responsibility to consolidate it into the BCMVCD? With the first question answered, we moved onto the second.

“We have a monthly meeting with Jeff and he gives us a report of the district, what he's purchasing, what he's doing,” explained Scott Damon, who has been on the OMAD board for 16

months. “He’s very good at letting me know what’s going on with the district, but I wouldn’t say that he’s supervised on a daily basis. We trust him. He has a job to do. We have to trust him.”

So it comes down to trust.

As Moench put it, “You have one guy who answers to nobody.”

OMAD works with taxpayer money. Its equipment is minimal—two pickups, a couple foggers—as is its payroll, with one full-time employee and two seasonal employees. Durham, a similarly bare-bones district, works with roughly the same amount of property-tax income, and has just two employees—the manager works full time just part of the year, and an office manager works on an as-needed basis.

In contrast, BCMVCD receives roughly \$1.5 million in property-tax income and therefore is able to fund a much larger, more comprehensive operation. Its equipment includes more than 35 land vehicles, three planes and about 20 foggers. It employs some 25 people during the summer months.

“We try to maintain a good working relationship with the managers [of the smaller districts],” says Matt Ball, manager of BCMVCD. “Their manpower is smaller, and their available resources are smaller.”

David Moench has been hounding OMAD for about a year now. He sees a taxpayer-funded entity with little or no oversight—the five-member board currently has only three members, for instance—and a manager who doesn’t wear a uniform and drives his district vehicle to and from work.

“[The manager] works when he wants and wears shorts to work, not a uniform, even when spraying,” Moench wrote in a letter to the CN&R. He also submitted a grievance to the Grand Jury, which will publish its findings in June. “He drives the city vehicle from his home in Paradise to Oroville at the city’s expense.”

He’s right, too. Cahn explained that when he is handling chemicals—he fogs about twice a month—he wears eye protection, gloves and a full suit. But most of the time he’s surveying or merely handling mosquito fish, which live in water and eat the larvae.

“It’s been my policy that if we’re just handling ice chests [with mosquito fish], we can wear shorts and a T-shirt,” Cahn explained, adding, “I drive my district vehicle home every night. I’ve had approval for that forever.”

Board member Damon concurred, adding that it’s a perk that was offered in lieu of a pay raise some years ago.

Whether any of the abovementioned issues are problematic or inefficient doesn’t really seem to matter, however, because nobody wants to do anything about it.

“I don’t know why they haven’t been merged,” said BCMVCD’s Ball, adding, “Our board has always said it’s up to the voting public. That’s one reason why this district has not and will not initiate a consolidation.”

LAFCo had a similar response.

“Consolidating the district would take a vote. It’s a very complicated process,” explained Stephen Lucas, executive officer of LAFCo. “It’s not as easy as just saying it would be more efficient. You have to look at staffing and contracts. It’s a very complicated process, and it takes a lot of political will. In the end there’s not a groundswell of interest per se.”

And so goes the story of OMAD, maybe for another hundred years.