



Municipal Service Review

FALLBROOK REGION

FINAL

REPORT SUMMARY | February 2022



General Themes and Conclusions

The Fallbrook region serves as the social and economic epicenter of unincorporated “North County.” It comprises four internally distinct subregions that collectively draw on municipal services provided by the County of San Diego and the four special districts that are evaluated as part of this report: Fallbrook PUD; North County FPD; Rainbow MWD; and CSA No. 81. The Town of Fallbrook and its “village” setting headlines the four subregions with its cultural, retail, medical offices, schools, and entertainment venues that residents in the others – Bonsall, De Luz, and Rainbow – regularly patron. The region overall remains mostly rural in character outside the Town core and continues to function as a community separator between the more urban uses to the north (Temecula) and south (Escondido) along the Interstate 15 corridor. Population growth also remains moderate – at least in comparison to countywide averages – but has cumulatively added up with an overall resident estimate

of 56,482 at the end of the five-year report period. This estimate makes the region one of the largest unincorporated areas with a population base that exceeds 7 of the 18 cities in San Diego County.

While conditions in the Fallbrook region appear to be holding course, there are indications that foundational changes are underway. Most notably, the region’s historical immersion in agriculture with avocados being the primary cash crop over the last 60 plus years appears to be waning and could spell fundamental changes in land uses and municipal service needs going forward. Measuring this transition is marked by the loss of nearly one-fifth – or (18.7%) – of the total number of avocado acreages in the region during the report period. Some of this acreage has already been converted into housing with nearly 600 new units added in the region during the reporting period; an amount equal to an overall 2% increase in the housing stock and above historical averages.

» General Themes and Conclusions

More of this acreage appears to have been left fallow and suggests – among other items – the cost of growing avocados in the “Avocado Capital of the World” for many local farmers has become unsustainable. Consequently, and in the absence of a turnaround and/or replacement crop emerging, the region will increasingly become an intersection point where the demand for housing in greater San Diego County meets the supply of available land.

A review of the Fallbrook region relative to San Diego LAFCO’s growth management tasks and interests produces

nine central themes or conclusions. These conclusions collectively address the availability, need, and adequacy of municipal services in the region and range in substance from addressing governance dynamics to financial standing. The conclusions also address potential sphere of influence changes among the four affected local agencies. The conclusions are independently drawn and sourced to information collected and analyzed by the Commission between 2016 and 2020 with limited exceptions and detailed in the agency profiles.

Close to one-fifth of all avocado groves in the Fallbrook region have been lost during the report period. Consequently, and in the absence of a turnaround and/or replacement crop emerging, the region will increasingly become an intersection point where the demand for housing in greater San Diego County meets the supply of available land.



No. 1

Introductory Municipal Service Review

This report represents the Commission’s first comprehensive municipal service review prepared on the Fallbrook region and the four affected local agencies – Fallbrook PUD, North County FPD, Rainbow MWD, and CSA No. 81. The report consequently serves as a dual introduction. This is marked by introducing the affected agencies and their constituents in real-time to an otherwise unfamiliar and relatively detailed outside planning process. The introduction similarly introduces the Commission to the affected agencies and their service functions at depths previously unvisited with the underlying goal of establishing baseline information to track and measure going forward.

No. 2

Slow and Steady Consolidation of Local Government

The Fallbrook region has slowly and steadily experienced a significant amount of consolidation in local government in recent history with the number of special districts having been reduced by one-half from eight to the current four: Fallbrook PUD; North County FPD; Rainbow MWD; and CSA No. 81. Opportunities for additional consolidation appear notionally plausible – and in some cases presumably probable – given overlapping and/or adjacent boundaries with common services powers. Nonetheless, community interest in the topic appears limited at this time and materially contributed to the Commission choosing to reject the last proposed consolidation in the region involving Fallbrook PUD’s proposed takeover of Rainbow MWD in September 2015.

No. 3

Avocados' Influence in the Region

The Fallbrook region remains mostly rural in character outside the Town of Fallbrook's core and continues to function as a community separator between the more urban uses to the north (Temecula) and south (Escondido) along the Interstate 15 corridor. This historical role is largely attributed to the region's successful immersion in agriculture with avocados being the primary cash crop since the introduction of reliable water supplies in the 1950s. The recent and significant decline in avocado production, highlighted by the loss of nearly one-fifth of planted acreage during the reporting period, suggests the cost of growing avocados in the "Avocado Capital of the World" is becoming unsustainable and fundamental changes in land use and municipal service needs may be on the horizon.



Solar panels facilitate well pumping in Fallbrook, California.

No. 4

Growth is Happening

Irrespective of the staying power of avocados and agriculture overall, it is reasonable to assume some level of substantive growth and development will occur in the Fallbrook region and potentially within the timeframe of this report. This assumption ties to the critical demand for housing in San Diego County paired with the region's available land supply with more than two-fifths of private acreage remaining undeveloped with existing jurisdictional access to wholesale water supplies via the County Water Authority and Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Ongoing declines in avocado production will expedite and intensify this otherwise expected trend.

No. 5

Distinguishing Gray, Green, and Blue (Collar) Demographics

Demographic information for the Fallbrook region shows residents tend to be measurably older with higher household incomes relative to overall averages in San Diego County at the end of the report period. Somewhat relatedly, one out of every four adults in the region are collecting retirement payments, which is nearly double the ratio for all of San Diego County. Additionally, and separately, the combination of high incomes and comparatively low college degree holders suggests a relatively high percentage of the region's workforce involves professional blue collar (i.e. agriculture, construction, public safety, etc.).

No. 6

Adequate and Excess Municipal Service Capacities

Fallbrook PUD, North County FPD, and Rainbow MWD collectively serve as the municipal service hubs for the Fallbrook region and through the end of the report period have established adequate capacities to meet current demands relative to their core growth-supporting functions: potable water; wastewater; and fire protection. No substantive deficiencies have been identified and all core functions have excess capacities to accommodate the anticipated growth within the report timeframe without exceptions.

No. 7

Stress-Testing is Underway

Three of the four affected agencies in the Fallbrook region – Fallbrook PUD, North County FPD, and Rainbow MWD – have experienced clear and measurable financial stresses during the report period. This includes all three agencies undergoing moderate to substantive declines in their liquidity, capital, and margin levels with the latter measurement magnified by two – North County FPD and Rainbow MWD – finishing with negative average total and operating margins over the corresponding 60 months. While all three agencies remain solvent based on their overall net positions, the recent trends are noteworthy and merits additional Commission attention going forward.



Residential homes near Interstate 15 in Fallbrook, California.

» General Themes and Conclusions

No. 8
The Unknown Case for Incorporating Fallbrook

There has been reoccurring interest in the Fallbrook region and more specifically within the Town of Fallbrook to incorporate and transition local governance from the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors to a newly established city council. Incorporation interest peaked in the form of a formal proposal filing by Fallbrook PUD in 1987, which was approved by the Commission but failed to receive majority voter approval. Community interest has persisted via continued informal inquiries and it is reasonable to assume formal efforts to revisit incorporation will reemerge within the Town given its size and local resources. Accordingly, and consistent with earlier policy direction, it would be beneficial for LAFCO to prepare an informational report to advise on current statutory thresholds and associated incorporation opportunities in San Diego County to include – but not limited to – Fallbrook.

No. 9
Reorganizations are on the Mind of Locals

There are three separate reorganization proposals currently on file with the Commission that propose substantive jurisdictional changes within the Fallbrook region and – among other items – necessitate conforming sphere of influence actions. Two of the proposals involve separate requests by Fallbrook PUD and Rainbow MWD to change wholesale water suppliers and detach from the County Water Authority and annex to Eastern MWD. The third proposal involves Fallbrook PUD’s request to activate its park and recreation, roads, and street lighting functions. As intended under statute, the Commission will draw on the information in this report in considering the individual merits of each proposal at separately noticed hearings.

The Fallbrook region comprises four distinct subregions – Bonsall, De Luz, Fallbrook, and Rainbow – and finished the report period with a total population estimate of nearly 57,000. This estimate makes the region one of the largest unincorporated communities in San Diego County.



Recommendations

The following recommendations call for specific action either from San Diego LAFCO and/or one or more of the affected agencies in the Fallbrook region based on information generated as part of this report and outlined below in order of their placement in Section 5.0 (Written Determinations). Recommendations for Commission action are dependent on a subsequent directive from the membership and through the annually adopted work plan.

1. San Diego LAFCO should coordinate with the County of San Diego and SANDAG to develop buildout estimates specific to each affected agency in the Fallbrook region and incorporate the information into a future municipal service review. This should include assessing potential impacts tied to the recent passage of Senate Bill 9 (Weiner) and the allowance for additional lot splitting to accommodate more housing throughout California.
2. The estimated loss of nearly (one-fifth) of avocado acreage in the Fallbrook region during the five-year report period is concerning and contrasts with San Diego LAFCO's adopted policies to promote and enhance agricultural resources. The Commission should explore this topic in more detail as part of its current two-year planning grant with the State of California to independently assess agricultural trends in San Diego County.
3. San Diego LAFCO should coordinate with the County of San Diego to identify permitted groundwater wells and septic systems within Fallbrook PUD and Rainbow MWD and incorporate the information into a future municipal service review.
4. San Diego LAFCO should address Fallbrook PUD's recycled water service activities as part of a future policy update to Commission Rule No. 4 with respect to formally identifying the function, class, and authorized location as necessitated under Government Code 56425(i).
5. San Diego LAFCO should develop performance measurements in consultation with North County FPD with respect to hazardous materials response and weed abatement (fuel reduction) and incorporate the analysis into future municipal service reviews.
6. Additional information is needed to determine the number of mutual water companies operating in the Fallbrook region. San Diego LAFCO should defer this analysis, accordingly, to a future informational report and in doing so meet its related obligation in statute.
7. San Diego LAFCO should revisit fire protection and emergency medical services and costs in the North County FPD as part of an update to the Commission's countywide fire service study.
8. North County FPD should consolidate its two existing taxing authority zones into one and eliminate the antiquated and cumbersome distinction associated with maintaining a separate subzone for the Rainbow community.
9. Opportunities for additional consolidations in the Fallbrook region appear notionally plausible – and in some cases presumably probable. No information analyzed in this report, however, suggest the timing of any consolidation proposals are imminent or otherwise merit initiation by San Diego LAFCO at this time.



Agricultural lands in Fallbrook, California.



Downtown
Fallbrook area on
a sunny day.

» Recommendations

10. All affected agencies in the Fallbrook region should enhance accountability to their constituents by permanently live-streaming and posting videos of board meetings online. These efforts grant constituents immediate access to the Board while remedying logistical obstacles (work, childcare, etc.) and further sunlights decision-making.
11. The Commission should prepare a future informational report to advise on current statutory thresholds and associated incorporation opportunities in the Fallbrook region.
12. Fallbrook PUD has filed a reorganization with San Diego LAFCO to activate certain latent powers and headlined by parks and recreation, roads, and street lighting. Approval of the proposal may further illuminate the merits of reorganizing Fallbrook PUD into a community services district to provide a local governance model that can continue to evolve with the community needs and serve as the preferred transitional vehicle to a potential incorporation.
13. Fallbrook PUD, Rainbow MWD, and CSA No. 81 do not report providing municipal services beyond their jurisdictional boundaries. There also does not appear to be any pending needs or demands to establish services outside the affected agencies' boundaries. San Diego LAFCO should proceed with updating and affirming – with no changes – these agencies' spheres of influence upon completion of the municipal service review.
14. There appears to be merit in expanding North County FPD's sphere of influence into Riverside County to more accurately reflect the FPD's current and probable service area going forward given location and existing automatic aid arrangements. San Diego LAFCO should further explore this potential amendment – directly or as special study area – upon completion of the municipal service review.
15. Notwithstanding other recommendations, a boundary adjustment between San Diego and Riverside Counties appears geographically merited to expand the former further into the De Luz area to reflect existing accessibility and first responder activities. San Diego LAFCO should coordinate with Riverside LAFCO in assessing the political merits of a boundary change and related interest therein by affected landowners and residents and proceed as appropriate.