

INVESTIGATOR REWRITES REPORT ON RUCKER FATALITY

JANUARY 30 -- SAN DIEGO, CA: The San Diego County medical examiner has revised a disputed report on the death of a Novato firefighter who was burned over in a southern California wildfire last fall. Her initial report contradicted some of the preliminary CDF findings, and colleagues of Steven Rucker had questioned aspects of the medical examiner's report.

According to the Santa Rosa Press-Democrat <http://www.pressdemocrat.com/local/news/30rucker_b1.html>, Gretchen Geary, the San Diego County investigator who drafted the report, said yesterday that it contained errors. But she said the reaction was fueled by news accounts that "misconstrued entirely" her report.

Rucker was killed while trying to protect a home in Wynola; he was part of a four-man engine crew overrun by flames. The other three took shelter in the house, but Rucker fell and was burned to death.

Geary said chief among the inaccuracies in the earlier version of her report was a conclusion that the other firefighters deployed their shelters; that error suggested that the firefighters had made a tactical error in deploying shelters rather than using the house as a safety zone.

"If I was a Monday morning quarterback," said Novato Fire Chief Jeff Meston, "I would ask, 'Why in the world didn't they go into the house?' That puts into question a lot of concerns about people's capabilities." Meston had asked that the report be revised.

Geary said the error was compounded by news reports indicating that Rucker was carrying a chainsaw when he was overrun, but the report actually said, "Near his body were his firefighting equipment, consisting of chain saw, radio, emergency shelter and miscellaneous tools." The amended report says the firefighters put the chain saw and an ax near the house as part of their strategy, and one of the other firefighters said it was actually his radio and tools found near Rucker's body.

Changes have been made already based on the incident; for example, the Novato fire engine's brake lines were made of plastic. They were melting while the crew was trying to escape the flames. The department is now refitting its vehicles with braided stainless-steel brake lines.