

Hospital district moves toward long-term acute care and urgent care, closure of ER

- By E.I. Hillin Staff Writer e.hillin@sonomawest.com
- Aug 7, 2018 Updated **Aug 7, 2018**

Singh looked to as district's 'Hail Mary'

Palm Drive Health Care District board members voted unanimously to move forward with negotiations to transition the hospital from general acute care with an emergency room to a long term acute care with an urgent care facility.

"I do think Dr. Singh (American Advanced Management Group, Inc.) represents a possible success for this place," said Dennis Colthurst, PDHCD board president.

With a pledge to keep the hospital open, while keeping current hospital staff employed, providing urgent care, providing outpatient surgery and keeping the radiology, ICU and lab open the board was overwhelmingly in agreement with approval of AAMG's plan of action.

"I just think to me it represents the 'Hail Mary' if you will," Colthurst said. "And you have a history of winning."

In the crowded three-hour-long joint meeting of the PDHCD governing body and board of directors, two proposals were heard and questioned. Dr. Gurpreet Singh, AAMG President and his staff, including Chief Executive Officer Gia Smith, presented their business plan while being grilled with questions from the public, the district boards and SWMC staff.

The main objection voiced from the board was AAMG's lack of interest in keeping the hospital's emergency room open. Singh commented on his historical research done on the district's financial failures and called the hospital a "parasite" on the community. He said an emergency room does not work for the hospital.

According to AAMG's presentation, long term acute care (LTAC) facilities are primarily for chronically, critically ill patients, many on ventilators or undergoing extensive wound care, and serves them with treatment and rehabilitation. LTACs are mandated to average a 25-day length of stay.

Singh and staff said they would assume financial responsibility for the hospital's transition by paying staff and keeping the hospital running. They also pledged to purchase the hospital at some point.

Singh said it will take six to eight months to obtain documentation to open the urgent care facility, but the hospital would be able to function as a long-term acute care facility without need to obtain a different license.

Larry Anderson with CURA Healthcare, Inc., spoke after the AAMG presentation about his own proposal. The main differences pointed out by the public and the boards involved Anderson's lack of financial investment to bridge the gap during the hospital's transition and his lack of experience dealing with small community hospitals.

Anderson was willing to keep the hospital as an acute care facility with an emergency room and was open to the proposal of contracting with the county to operate a mental health facility unit in the hospital building.

All members from the two boards weighed in on who would be able to keep the hospital healthy. Several members were on the brink of tears as they shared stories about their connection to the hospital.

The only board member showing favor for Anderson was Gail Thomas. She said keeping the emergency room is ultimately what she would want for the hospital.

To lawfully close the emergency room, a 30-day notice must be given. According to the latest cash flow projections reported at the meeting, SWMC will run out of money at the end of August.

SWMC staff was assured by Dan Smith, SWMC board chairman, and Barbara Vogelsang, SWMC chief nursing officer, that money has been reserved to pay them what they are owed, including paid time off.

"I do want to assure all employees that we have kept in reserve \$950,000 to make sure employees, even if we had to close, would be paid their final pay and PTO (paid time off)," Smith said.

AAMG operates 13 facilities and services in California, with headquarters in Modesto. They have been operating for seven years and have expanded rapidly in that time.

As current contractors with the district, Sonoma West Medical Center, Inc. would have to be involved in the transition of contracts. Smith said he is committed to working with AAMG to making that transition happen.

There are still concerns about how the transition would impact the \$155 annual parcel tax on each taxable parcel in the district. PDHCD issued revenue bonds secured by the parcel tax.

Bill Arnone, the district's attorney, said his consultation with the bond counsel is ongoing and he believes if changes in the contract's wording are necessary they will be made.

Another concern involves the absence of an emergency room and the original intention of formation of the district. According to the resolution of the Local Agency Formation Commission of the County of Sonoma (LAFCO), "the purpose of the proposed district is to ensure local access to emergency, acute care and other medical services to residents and visitors of the district area."

The PDHCD board is expected to work through negotiations with AAMG and come back with a contract for approval by the end of the week.

East Bay Times

East Contra Costa Fire loaning Oakley \$1.9 million interest-free to build station



Dan Rosenstrauch/staff archives

The East Contra Costa Fire Protection District Station 53, above, on O'Hara Avenue in Oakley is set to have a sister station in town now that an interest-free \$1.9 million loan from the ECCFPD will help the city cover a funding gap to pay for it. Station 55 will be built on East Cypress Road, directly across from Summer Lake Drive, and construction is expected to be done by next spring or early summer.

By [Judith Prieve](mailto:jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com) | jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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OAKLEY — A \$1.9 million loan from East Contra Costa Fire Protection District will help the city cover a funding gap to pay for a new fire station.

The city had planned to fund the station with money from a developer that agreed to give \$3.6 million for the building, the lot and an engine. But because of rising construction costs, the city will now need \$5.7 million to build the proposed fire station. Future development fees will also help cover the funding shortfall. Developer Shea Homes agreed to pay the \$3.6 million in lieu of developer fees at its Summer Lake subdivision. Without the \$1.9 million zero-interest loan authorized by the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District board, Oakley officials said they would be unable to build the station.

“It’s a long process trying to get that station built,” ECCFPD Chief Brian Helmick said after the Aug. 6 board meeting. “It has been part of the plan for years, long before I was here.”

City Manager Bryan Montgomery said that as subcontractor bids started coming in this summer, it was obvious costs would be higher than first projected, something he said most projects are seeing at this time.

“Early on we knew the \$3.6 million would be tight, but some additional scope and the crazy increases in construction costs led to the need for additional funding,” Montgomery wrote in an email. “Rather than reduce the scope of the project, the additional funding made the most sense to the district and the city.”

Helmick said the money will come from the district’s operating reserves, which are more than \$5 million over the 20 percent required. The reserves include \$6.2 million an external audit had discovered in a Contra Costa County bank account last year that the financially strapped fire district should have received as savings from staff reductions and fire station closures over the past several years. Although the board approved the loan 6-1, with two directors absent, some objected to the deal.

“If Oakley wanted to build the fire station . . . they could go to a bank or some other municipal lending source as well as come to the fire district,” resident Bryan Scott said. “It’s obvious they recognize the fire district discovered it had \$6.2 million — and it’s been sitting there all this time — so the city has recognized here’s a potential source of funds, and if we ask them and apply this time-sensitive motivation, we can get them to loan us the money for free.”

Board member Erick Stonebarger also questioned the loan.

“I understand the loan, the concept,” Stonebarger said. “But they are going to build a fire station that we can’t staff that we will have to pay to maintain. In order to staff it, we are going to have to ask for more money.”

Helmick agreed that there’s no money to staff the station but said it’s still necessary to get the infrastructure in place. If the district were to get money for additional firefighters now, there would be no place for them to work.

“This is the most cost-effective way to be able to build a station and improve our infrastructure,” Helmick said. “It is mutually beneficial for the city and the fire district.”

Stonebarger objected to using operating reserve funds for the loan.

“The operating reserve is going to suffer. It won’t generate any interest for nine or 10 years (the estimated loan payback period). Right now it generates some interest to allow us to last a little longer,” he said.

Director Joe Young questioned the details of the loan, which were not available at the Aug. 6 board meeting, but in the end gave his approval.

“This is a very complex set of issues,” he said. “In order to save \$500,000 to \$1 million, we need to approve this loan, but I guess we can hold our nose while we do it.”

Station 55 will be built on East Cypress Road, directly across from Summer Lake Drive, midway between the two stations that are no longer operable — in Knightsen and Bethel Island. The price tag shot up because of rising construction costs and a design modification to include a multipurpose room and storage areas, two items the district said was needed if the station is to last 50 years as planned, Helmick said. Helmick touted the loan proposal as a way to get the project started now, before costs shoot up even more.

“The reason this came so quickly, one of the driving factors, was locking in those construction costs,” he said. “It will take a long time to collect the money and that is why we need to lock in the bids and construction costs; the bids will expire.”

The city awarded Ascent Builders the contract in January, and construction should be completed by next spring or early summer, Montgomery said. Helmick contended that in the end the city will deed the district the \$5.7 million station, so it will be an asset.

“I’m confident we will get that money back,” Helmick said. “I couldn’t agree to this without having those agreements to recover the money. They (developer fees) continue to go to the fire district until the amount is recovered nine or 10 years from now.”

Oakley estimates the \$200,000 from impact fees it collects each year will go toward paying off the loan. The exact terms of the agreement are still being worked out, which is one of the reasons Stonebarger said he would not approve it.

“It’s a no-cost loan with no term when it is due, and there’s a lack of our ability to structure the loan so we can call the loan (if needed),” he said. “I’m not going to approve a \$1.9 million loan without first seeing the agreement.”

The road to building another Oakley fire station has been a long one, with residents in the Summer Lake area waiting more than a decade. Summer Lake was first approved by Contra Costa County in the 1990s, and in 2006 Oakley approved a development agreement stipulating that Shea Homes needed to build the station “prior to the occupancy of the 600th residence.” Despite the agreement, Shea delayed giving the money to Oakley.

The city filed suit against Shea Homes in March 2016 and settled late last year. Under the settlement agreement, Shea Homes paid \$3,120,000 and gave a 1-acre parcel on the northwest corner of East Cypress Road and Summer Lake Drive to the city to build the fire station. The developer also agreed to pay \$623,000 for a new fire engine. In return, the fire district agreed to waive all rights to Oakley developer fees from the developer of the Summer Lake project.

UPDATE: Palm Drive Health Care District accepts plan to turn hospital into long-term acute care facility

- By Rollie Atkinson and E.I. Hillin
- Aug 17, 2018 Updated **Aug 18, 2018**

Directors of the Palm Drive Health Care District voted 4-1 in a special meeting Friday afternoon (Aug. 17) to accept an offer from Modesto-based American Advanced Management Group to replace the Sonoma West Medical Center team and begin to convert the former Palm Drive Hospital to a long-term acute care facility with an urgent care center.

The decision was made on the eve of a likely hospital closure as SWMC had recently announced it would run out of money before the end of the month. The vote also means, steps will begin right away to close the west county hospital's emergency room in as soon as 30 days.

Dennis Colthurst, chair of the PDHCD board of directors confirmed the vote late Friday afternoon which was held in a public open session at the hospital. He pointed out that the agreement with AAMG is available to the public at the district's website (<http://palmdrivehealthcaredistrict.org>.)

The approved agreement between the health care district and AAMG is for 10 years and includes a \$100,000 monthly hospital management fee to be paid by the taxpayer district to AAMG.

At an Aug. 10 district meeting, PDHCD attorney Bill Arnone reported to the board that entering into a contract without assuming financial responsibilities for loss would not be compliant with Internal Revenue Service requirements.

Dr. Gurpreet Singh, president of AAMG previously told the PDHCD board that it will take six to eight months to obtain documentation to open the urgent care facility, but the hospital would be able to function as a long-term acute care facility without needing to obtain a different license.

Critics of the move to convert the hospital to a long term care facility and eliminate emergency medicine services have complained that doing away with the emergency room would run counter to the original intention behind the formation of the hospital district. According to the 1999 resolution of the Local Agency Formation Commission of the County of Sonoma (LAFCO), "the purpose of the proposed district is to ensure local access to emergency, acute care and other medical services to residents and visitors of the district area."

(8) comments

[lulu](#) Aug 20, 2018 11:51am

People who accuse others of showing WRATH are guilty of exactly that themselves. I would like to detach from the detachment which was selfish, unkind, mean act across the board.

[Lovethyneighbor](#) Aug 20, 2018 11:28am

I was at the meeting Friday and heard many moving comments regarding the lives the hospital had saved for those who would have died if they had gone to Santa Rosa. The appreciation for the hospital by those in attendance was a pleasure to experience. Fortunately, Dr. Singh and his group will be able to keep the hospital open for most of its regular services during and after the transition, they will have an expanded urgent care available with hours that meet the community needs with all the ICU, x-ray, CT scanning and other services already present in the hospital, and they will allow most current personnel to keep their jobs while expanding employment opportunities when the hospital transitions to accommodate the long term care patients in a LTAC facility our county desperately needs. Being a long term West County resident who has supported our hospital as a vital element of our community, believing that we should include health care, just as we support our schools, police, fire department, libraries and other social services. I am continually dismayed and saddened by those who fail to value a human life saved, who denigrate the heroic doctors and staff of the hospital, and who care more for their \$13 a month tax than they do for the loved ones a hospital treats and saves. Our whole medical system has been under assault for the past few decades. Would we expect our schools or police or firefighters to be part of "financially profitable" institutions? Health care should be a basic human right and one we all gladly support. We have happily avoided the closing of the hospital and I know the majority of our West County community continue to support it, regardless of the very vocal detractors, some of whom would rather see condominiums or shopping centers in its place.

[Consumer's watch](#) Aug 18, 2018 5:54pm

Congratulations to the Russian River communities who were quick to detach after the new board majority was voted in. The river communities will not receive the wrath of Gail Thomas, Dennis Colthurst, Dr. Powers and Eira Klick-Heart as a result of their vote to incur more debt. Our condolences to the taxpayers left in the district. They will absorb this \$4.7 Million in debt until a possible sale occurs. Note, we said "possible sale." It is written in the agreement there is no guarantee of a purchase. It's just a one sided "option to purchase" without a financial consequence. Also, written into their management agreement is a 10 year lease. Imagine that over the next 10 years the district taxpayers parcel taxes will go to sustain a long term patient facility with admissions from hospitals all over the region. And, pity the poor past employee's and creditor's of the bankruptcy. This District board majority has "no plan" to exit this bankruptcy going on 5 years. Shame, shame on this board majority, this is a disgraceful stream of events. The only way to change things is to vote them out of office. Will parcel taxpayer's boot them out? We'll see.

[BLD](#) Aug 19, 2018 10:11am

Oh, we'll still receive their wrath. It's going to take longer to pay off our share of the debt. Instead of a plan to pay off bankruptcy over, say a nine or ten year period, they could string of our longer. That Board is supposed to uphold the vote of the public, which, according to the formation of the district was to maintain an acute care facility, emergency department AND

other medical services. Two out of three are down now and it should be up to voters to change those terms. The District is a mere shell of the original intent approved by taxpayers.

[dogandpony](#) Aug 18, 2018 1:24pm

FYI...Regarding Chapter 9 Bankruptcy. Under 11 U.S. Code 930 - Dismissal:
After notice and a hearing, the court may dismiss a case under this chapter for cause, including-
(2) unreasonable delay by the debtor that is prejudicial to creditors;
(3) failure to propose a plan within the time fixed under section 941 of this title;

[FED UP](#) Aug 18, 2018 9:14am

This is nothing more than another desperate attempt to keep the doors open! Yes sell the parcel and pay the former employees!!!!

I, as a former employee lost everything in the Tubbs fire 10 months ago and am in dire need of any funds owed to me. It has been almost 5 years now and still no plan to repay the hard working people that made the former hospital what it was, And now this puppet show needs to end!! STOP wasting more of the tax payers money and pay what you owe!!!!!!!!!!

[Beef](#) Aug 18, 2018 7:59am

The Board of 'Directors' and Dr. Singh should announce their intention to cut all ties to taxpayers as a source of funding their schemes.

Again, where are regulators? They were there with approval when the hospital scheme was initially proposed, and now they are nowhere to be found. If it weren't for Sonoma West and local activists that put personal resources into detachment from the district I would still be paying for a bunch of knuckleheaded riverboat gamblers running an alleged hospital. Wow! Hard to believe the conversation about the facility continues down the path of long-term acute care. My idea of using the facility as a Farmers Market is just as ridiculous and a better idea as well. Sad.

[SFerguson](#) Aug 17, 2018 10:15pm

Good intentions with likely a bad outcome sadly. The board took away the firewall for new debt to the district, allowing for taxpayers to fund a 3rd bankruptcy should this fail. The 2014 bankruptcy is not even in the courts with an exit plan at this time, and all the former employees are still owed over 1.2 million dollars in last months pay from April 2014. The new type of acute care will not serve West County, it will serve mostly North Bay patients that have a very specific criteria to be admitted. There will not be health care provided for the tax payers of the district. The board should have listened to Mr Horn and the audience and voted no to the plan with a potential 4 million dollar debt tag in the next 6 months. The Board needs to get out of the hospital business and sell the property. A rural hospital is not financially feasible and they are failing their fiduciary responsibility to the tax payers.

KQED

San Francisco Is Fighting California's Plan to Save Salmon. Wait. What?

August 20, 2018



More than 2.5 million Bay Area residents get their water from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. *(Lauren Sommer/KQED)*

California water officials are poised to approve a revolutionary plan that could redefine the way water is allocated.

'It's a big deal and trying to fix it is not for the faint of heart.'

Felicia Marcus, State Water Resources Control Board

At stake are the state's oldest water rights, known as “senior rights,” which have long been seen as untouchable, and that includes San Francisco's.

For a century, San Francisco has enjoyed a pristine source of water, dodging the shortages others have faced during California's chronic water wars. Now, as key rivers continue a downward ecological spiral, the city is being pulled into the fray.

The state plan has sparked a fierce debate. Environmental groups say it doesn't go far enough to save imperiled salmon. San Francisco doesn't agree and it's allied itself with some unexpected bedfellows: conservative agricultural districts in the Central Valley.

That might be surprising for San Francisco, known for its solar-powered, food-composting climate-friendly reputation. Yet when it comes to water, some say the city is lagging behind others that are on the leading edge of reusing and recycling their supplies.

A Separate Piece

Like most California cities, San Francisco gets the majority of its from far beyond its borders; in this case, it's 150 miles away in Yosemite National Park. That's where Hetch Hetchy Reservoir traps snowmelt that feeds the Tuolumne River.

From there, the water [flows through a chain of reservoirs](#) and pipelines that carry it directly to San Francisco. It also supplies much of the Bay Area. About 2.7 million people from Alameda County to Silicon Valley rely on it as well.

San Francisco's right to the water goes back to 1901, when leaders in the booming city were desperately searching for a new supply. As the story goes, the claim was tacked to an 8-inch diameter oak tree on a riverbank.



Flows on the Tuolumne River in 1912. (*J.G. Spaack, USGS*)

“When you filed for water rights, you basically had to post a notice where you proposed to divert water from,” explains Steve Ritchie, assistant general manager at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, “which in effect was filing a piece of paper to a tree that was hanging over the Tuolumne River.”

Following its natural course, water in the Tuolumne flows into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the great nexus of California's supply and the trenches of the fiercest battles over water. By sinking a straw into the Tuolumne to take out water far upstream of the Delta, San Francisco has avoided those fights.

“San Francisco has been able to stay out of the water wars because the San Francisco system is separate from other systems,” says Ritchie.

Water Wars Flow Uphill

Now, the ecological crisis in the Delta has gotten so bad, the water wars are reaching all the way upstream.

Before it gets to the Delta, the Tuolumne joins up with the San Joaquin, a major river that often runs completely dry.

“In some years, up to 90 percent of the water is taken out of the river by humans,” says Jon Rosenfield, a biologist with the Bay Institute, an environmental group. “Once the river loses that much, it’s not really functioning like a river anymore. The salmon fishery has plummeted.”

Chinook salmon, the species that fishermen catch in the Pacific Ocean, must return to California’s rivers to reproduce and lay their eggs. In 1984, about 70,000 Chinook returned to the San Joaquin River basin. By 2014, it was down to 8,000.

California is required by federal law to regulate water quality in the Delta. [The Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan](#), as it’s known, was last updated more than 20 years ago.

Now, the State Water Resources Control Board has put together a new plan that attempts to balance both the health of the environment and the needs of farms and cities.

“It’s a big deal and trying to fix it is not for the faint of heart,” says Felicia Marcus, chair of the water board. “We’re simply bound to rebalance a system that has had too much water removed from it for it to survive as a healthy ecosystem.”

The plan marks a new approach to how the Delta would be managed. Traditionally, protecting water quality and endangered species there has fallen to a few water users that have major pumping infrastructure in the Delta. They’re the ones who’ve faced cutbacks when water quality has degraded.

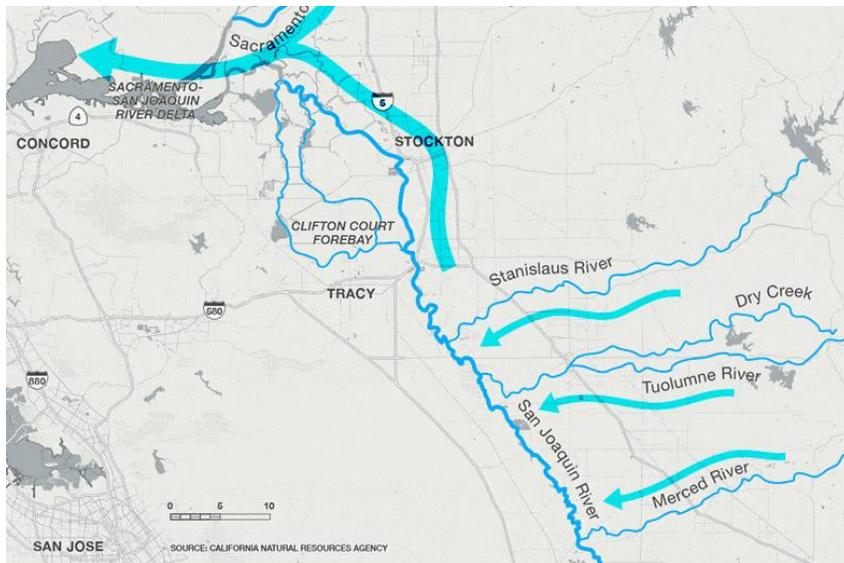
But in 2009, California lawmakers passed legislation requiring agencies to look at upstream river flows or “flow criteria.” It’s a more holistic approach, looking at the entire watershed.

“This is really a now-or-never moment,” says Rosenfield. “This proposal is the single most important event in California water in a generation. And it will take a generation to correct any mistakes that are made now.”

A [scientific report](#) that followed passage of the law, recommended restoring a natural springtime surge of water to help both the San Joaquin River and the Delta ecosystem. On the San Joaquin, the report concluded that the ecosystem needs 60 percent of “unimpaired flow,” meaning the flow that would naturally go down the river if humans weren’t siphoning off water along the way.

The state water board considered that number, but also is charged with balancing it with the needs of farms and cities.

“The issue isn’t about choosing one over the other,” says Marcus. “It’s about sharing the river as thoughtfully as we can.”



In a final draft plan released this year, the water board proposed returning 40 percent of the unimpaired flow to the San Joaquin and three of its tributaries: the Tuolumne, Stanislaus and Merced Rivers. The flows could fluctuate within a flexible range of 30 to 50 percent. Currently, flows range from 21 to 40 percent on average.

The numbers disappointed environmental groups, which argued the science supported higher flow in the river.

“Thirty to 50 percent of unimpaired flow is not going to address the problems the board is required to address,” says Rosenfield. “State and federal policy is not just to keep salmon from going extinct, but actually to restore them to benefit all of us and the commercial fishery.”

It also disappointed the water districts faced with giving up some of their water, including San Francisco.

Bottom Feeders

“It’s an aggressive stance to take because it means a lot of water,” says SFPUC’s Steve Ritchie. “It’s a big deal for the Bay Area, not the just the city and county of San Francisco.”

Even with its senior water rights, San Francisco has found itself, for the first time, at the bottom of the food chain.

On the Tuolumne River, the two other major water users, the Turlock Irrigation District and the Merced Irrigation District, have even earlier water rights, making them more senior. In California, the doctrine is generally “first in time, first in right,” so San Francisco would be facing cutbacks before those rural districts do.

In wet years, there would be plenty of water. But with the Bay Area growing, SFPUC predicts the cuts would mean rationing during droughts and billions of dollars of economic impact, though state board staff have challenged those numbers.

“We might have to, in the second year of a drought, go to 30 or 40 percent rationing and get to 50 percent in the fourth or fifth year,” says Ritchie. “All of a sudden, you’re having to save a lot more water really fast to know you have enough to get to the end of a drought.”

During the last drought, SFPUC’s customers conserved about 13 percent compared to pre-drought water use. Ritchie says to get deeper cuts, commercial and industrial customers would have to cut back.

Finding New Water

As SFPUC and other water districts filed increasingly alarmed comments on the proposed plan, the state board had a response: Get creative.

“Water users can adapt by switching crops, become more efficient, and putting more water away in wet or normal times for the inevitable dry times,” says Marcus.

That’s been common in some Southern California cities, which have led the way in water recycling, conservation and capturing storm water runoff for reuse.

San Francisco has been a bit late to the party.

“If you just look at their recycled water numbers, they’re pretty low,” says Heather Cooley of the Pacific Institute, a water policy think tank. “They certainly could do more.”

Last year, SFPUC broke ground on its first water recycling project. The [Westside Enhanced Water Recycling Project](#) will clean up wastewater and use it to irrigate Golden Gate Park and local golf courses.

Other cities have already taken water recycling to the next level. Orange County and San Jose treat some of their wastewater to drinking water quality so it can be added back to the area’s water supply.

Ritchie says SFPUC is in very early conversations for a similar project, but they take time.

“We’re being as progressive as we can,” says Ritchie. “We’re looking at taking wastewater from the Peninsula, treating it to a high level and put it in Crystal Springs reservoir, and blend it there into our local Bay Area supplies.”

Today, San Francisco residents use less water than average Californians do, thanks to a cool climate and the city’s lack of expansive lawns. Other parts of the Bay Area that use SFPUC’s water have higher water use.

“San Francisco certainly trails behind Los Angeles in terms of its efforts to conserve water,” says Rosenfield. “Los Angeles has grown its population by over a million people and reduced its total water demand.”

Still, San Francisco has a groundbreaking water efficiency policy, passed in 2012. New buildings of 250,000 square feet or more must have “[on-site reuse systems](#),” which could include recycling potable water and using it a second time to flush toilets.

“They’re the first city in California that has done that,” says Cooley. “It’s an innovative strategy for leveraging private investment in recycled water.”

If SFPUC does face cutbacks during a drought, the agency could buy water from farmers who would in turn fallow their land, a strategy known as “water transfers.”

Ritchie says SFPUC tried it during the last drought, but was unsuccessful in finding farmers willing to sell. Several other California water districts were able complete water transfer deals.

During a long-term drought, the SFPUC could buy water from an irrigation district at a price that would compensate farmers, laborers, processors and distributors for what they would have made -- but without having to do any work, and at a price lower than what the SFPUC charges its wholesale customers.

According to Peter Drekmeier of the Tuolumne River Trust, “That’s a pretty sweet incentive for irrigation districts to sell water to the Bay Area.”

A Road to Compromise

Following the nearly inevitable course of water battles in California, the water board’s plan is likely headed to court.

Asked whether San Francisco will be in line at the courthouse steps if the plan is formally adopted, Ritchie doesn't shrink from the question.

“Yeah, that’s a very real possibility because the consequences are so great,” he replies.

To avoid that, the water board has repeatedly asked for a deal to be struck. Water users, including SFPUC, could come up with a different plan that includes strategies to help salmon and other fish, like restoring floodplain habitat.

Despite several years of negotiations, a deal still isn’t on the table. SFPUC has argued that the “unimpaired flow” approach -- leaving more water in the Tuolumne River -- isn’t necessary and that restoration and other projects should be enough.

State officials and biologists, so far, haven’t agreed.

“Habitat restoration alone is not going to cut it,” says Rosenfield. “In order for restored habitat to work, there needs to be enough water for fish to use that habitat and migrate out of the river.”

The state water board delayed its final vote on the plan and will be taking more comments on Tuesday.

Whichever way it goes, it could be a wake-up call for San Francisco, which is now facing the same water-strapped realities as the rest of California.

“The future is challenging no matter what happens,” Ritchie says.

East Bay Times

As wildfire costs reach new heights, will homeowners get socked on insurance?

By [John Woolfolk](#) | jwoolfolk@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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Last year's California wildfires set benchmarks for costly destruction on a scale unheard of before, with the more than \$12 billion in losses topping the combined tab for the state's worst wildfires dating back decades.

There are no estimates yet for losses from this year's blazes. But halfway through the fire season, the state has [already seen its largest fire ever](#) with the Mendocino Complex Fire eclipsing December's Thomas Fire in scorched acreage. Last month's Carr Fire near Redding was the [sixth most destructive to property](#), comparable to San Diego's devastating 2007 Witch Fire.

And soon, state officials warn, the more than 3 million homeowners near wildland areas and the 1 million considered at high risk for wildfires will face a new worry: home insurance rates will rise, and insurers will drop coverage in some areas, making it hard to get a policy at all.

In Santa Rosa's Coffey Park neighborhood, hard-hit by last year's wildfires, neighborhood association president Jeff Okrepkie said many residents are worried that insurers will cancel their policies as soon as they legally can.

"We know insurers out there that have said as soon as we aren't legally obligated, we're out," said Okrepkie, who also works in commercial property insurance. "As far as rates go, they are going to go up."

California Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones acknowledged that "we're going to see more nonrenewals, more insurers declining to issue policies in some areas and rate increases" as a result of the wildfires.

It isn't just homeowners in designated high-risk areas that are vulnerable. Jones said that insurers are re-evaluating how they gauge wildfire risk in the Golden State, noting that in Sonoma County, 16.5 percent of homes were rated high or very high risk, but significant areas thought to be lower risk burned down. Insurers charge more for higher risk areas.

"There's no question insurers are going to reassess," Jones said. "What I anticipate we're going to see is the number or percentage of homes rated high or very high risk going to go up. So this phenomenon is not just limited to areas that burned or counties where fires have occurred."

The average California homeowner premium, excluding earthquake and flood insurance, was \$1,045 last year, up about 10 percent from \$954 a decade ago, according to the insurance

department. Rates vary widely based on the size and value of the home, deductibles, amount of insured coverage and fire risk.

“The days of people paying under \$1,000 for insurance are fast coming to a close in California,” said Amy Bach, executive director of the consumer group United Policyholders. “People can expect to be edging up well over \$1,000 in these rural areas, nudging above \$2,000.”

It’s hard to say yet what the exact impact will be on homeowners because the fires are so recent and the state heavily regulates insurers. State law requires insurance companies to renew homeowners’ policies at least once following a catastrophic loss. Insurers must seek state approval to change rates, and they must spread recovery for catastrophic losses over at least 20 years, so increases would be gradual.

But the costs of last year’s wildfires raise the specter that with a warming climate expected to fuel more frequent and destructive blazes, wildfires could produce damage on a scale of historically more costly disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and floods.

As Californians know from their experience with earthquakes, catastrophic costs on that scale can lead insurers to abandon the market.

“I don’t think fire risk is as acute as flood and earthquake,” Jones said, “but it could get there.”

Last October’s fires in and around California’s Wine Country alone caused more than \$9.7 billion in insured losses. The yearly total, including December’s massive Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, tops \$12.3 billion.

That’s about four times the toll of what had been the country’s costliest fire disaster before last year — the Oakland Hills Fire. That 1991 blaze caused \$1.7 billion in insured losses, more than \$2.7 billion in today’s dollars, [according to the Insurance Information Institute](#), a nonprofit industry-supported organization.

By contrast, the country’s most devastating hurricanes and earthquakes are typically much more costly because they tend to strike major metropolitan areas. [Hurricane Katrina, the nation’s costliest disaster, caused an estimated \\$41.1 billion](#) in insured losses in 2005 along the Gulf Coast and New Orleans, about \$50 billion today, according to the institute. Last year’s Hurricane Harvey, which inundated Houston, [caused an estimated \\$19 billion](#) in insured losses.

California’s [Northridge earthquake caused \\$15.3 billion](#) in insured losses in 1994, about \$25.6 billion today, according to the institute. The Loma Prieta earthquake caused \$960 million in insured losses in 1989, about \$1.9 billion today.

Losses from the Northridge quake were so high that many insurers bailed on California, forcing the state to create the California Earthquake Authority to help homeowners obtain coverage. But the [Los Angeles Times reported](#) that, today, only about one in 10 insured California homeowners has earthquake coverage. Those who decline often cite concerns about high premiums and deductibles for earthquake coverage. Earthquake premiums averaged \$1,033 last year, according to the insurance department.

A similar program, the California FAIR Plan, already exists to provide fire insurance for homeowners unable to get coverage in the insurance market. It was set up in the 1960s after the Watts riots prompted insurers to drop coverage in some urban areas. It provides bare-bones fire coverage at an average premium of \$637 but not other risks such as water damage covered in a typical homeowner policy. So those homeowners need supplemental coverage on the insurance market for that.

Among the 3 million homes near wildland areas, the number with FAIR Plan policies has grown by about 2,000 a year over the last four years, totaling 30,000 today, or about 1 percent of homes in those areas. A big spike in FAIR Plan policies could signal trouble in the private fire insurance market.

“They’re the canary in the coal mine,” Jones said.

State lawmakers could make matters much worse — they’re kicking around a proposal to ease utilities’ liability for wildfires caused by their equipment. Currently, utilities are liable if their equipment was a factor in starting a wildfire, even if they properly maintained it, and that helps insurers recoup their losses and keep a lid on premiums.

“That would fundamentally change the ability of insurers to recover from the responsible party,” said Mark Sektnan, vice president of the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, which represents the homeowner insurance industry. And that, in turn, would likely boost insurance rates further.

Still, with many more homes outside of wildfire risk areas, California’s insurance market is resilient when it comes to wildfire risk, Jones and industry representatives said.

“There are some companies that are re-evaluating risk, and there may be some companies pulling out of some areas,” Sektnan said. “But some of our member companies specialize in writing in high-risk areas.”

East Bay Times

Bradford Island seeks quick levee fix to avoid major floods



Karen Cunningham walks across the boat dock in front of her home on Bradford Island where she lives and raises cattle, Friday July 22, 2011. Cunningham loves the lifestyle of living on Brandon Island , but dislikes the fact her property is subject to intrusive surveys by water officials who want to build a tunnel beneath Bradford Island because of fears the levees will collapse. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff)



A new salinity barrier has been built in an attempt to keep the more salty water, right, away from Delta waters near Fisherman's Cut on Bradford Island, Calif., on Thursday, June 4, 2015. Crews add more rocks to the area at upper left. Some believe the barrier has made tides heavier in the area. The Jersey Island Ferry got stuck recently. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Bay Area News Group)

By [Judith Prieve](mailto:jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com) | jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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On the Delta's tiny Bradford Island in eastern Contra Costa County, grazing cattle and wandering goats overwhelmingly outnumber humans, but for the eight full-time residents and

ranchers there, plus a handful more of vacation homeowners, boat club members and occasional visitors, a steady flow of water seeping through the levee could spell big trouble.

On Friday, Reclamation District 2059, which maintains the island's 7.4 miles of levees along the Sacramento-San Joaquin River, formally declared a state of emergency on the remote private island, with hopes the resolution would help district board directors secure funding to make necessary repairs.

District engineer Blake Johnson of DHG Engineering has been monitoring the seepage for several months and says now is the time to fix the problem, before it enlarges and unleashes a fury of water that could flood the entire island.

"It's not a water faucet — it's not coming out really fast — but it's ponding at the toe of the levee on the north side of the island," he said of the 25-foot-wide levee seepage. "You don't want active seepage through a levee. At some point it could start moving material through, and then it becomes problematic."



After just leaving the dock at Bradford Island, the Victory II Jersey Island Ferry heads to Webb Tract as a motorboat heads in the opposite direction near Bradford Island, Calif., on the Delta on Thursday, June 4, 2015. The island's levee is experiencing seepage and officials are concerned that it needs to be fixed because at some point it could burst and cause a flood. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Bay Area News Group)

Bradford is one of the eight Delta islands the State Department of Water Resources deems critical to the region's water quality by preventing seawater intrusion into the fresh river water. If one floods, there could be a domino effect, flooding others and affecting the entire region's water quality, officials say.

"You're only as strong as your weakest point," Reclamation District 2059 director Michael Craig said. "We need to get it corrected before it gets worse."

The 2,500-acre island has seen a few seepages "here and there" over the years, Johnson said, but when the clear water turns brown and begins moving the dirt, levee failure could be imminent.

“The water typically dries up — we’ve seen that before with water under the levee,” he said. “But right now what we are seeing is active seepage through the levee, and if and when we see dirty water coming through, that’s a bad sign. That means the water pressure has built up and you’re looking at imminent failure at that point.”



Karen Cunningham looks over her cattle that she raises on Bradford Island in the Delta on Friday, July 22, 2011. Cunningham’s property is subject to intrusive surveys by water officials who want to build a tunnel beneath Bradford Island because of fears the levees will collapse. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff Archives)

The seepage is on the northern side of the island between Smith and Karen Cunningham’s home and Port of Stockton property. Smith Cunningham, who happens to be the levee’s superintendent, has been monitoring the situation, but he and wife Karen are concerned about how long it’s taking to fix the problem.

“This seepage has been getting worse by the day and they’ve basically done nothing for two months except talk about it,” Karen Cunningham said.

Smith Cunningham said the moisture collecting at the base of his small home, which sits on the levee, is causing the structure to sink a bit at one corner and has made his driveway and land around it unusable.

“It’s like a tidal marsh,” he said. “I can’t get into the driveway or put the horses there anymore.”

Although no one knows why the seepage is occurring, Johnson says the home’s location between two berms built to prevent seepage has left a 130-foot window of levee frontage property vulnerable. The Cunninghams’ property was not included in the 2014 levee maintenance project because the state did not approve the cost of raising and moving the home farther inland, he said.

So far, though, the erosion is only minor, but Johnson said continued seepage could cause trouble.

“If it does open up, it’s hard to predict how big this could be,” Johnson said. “It could flood the island before we could get in and place rock in the scour hole, plug the hole and pump out the island.”

That's just what happened to the island on Dec. 3, 1983, when a storm pummeled the levees and caused a 600-foot-wide breach, flooding all of the land. Residents escaped by ferry, the only way on and off the remote picturesque isle north of Bethel Island. Most did not return to the island, with its rich peat soil perfect for growing wheat and gazing at panoramic views of Mt. Diablo, though some did rebuild after the water was painstakingly pumped out.

Then it happened again, though not as severe, in August 2009 when a 570-foot freighter from the Port of Stockton grounded, lost its steering and hit the levee. The impact damaged a 150-foot section of the levee, causing a serious breach. It took crews three days of round-the-clock work to repair the levees at a cost of \$800,000.

A similar fate could befall the island if it doesn't find a quick fix soon, Johnson said.

"It could potentially be adding more salinity as the water gets to the pumps, and if you are pumping brackish water, that would be another cost," he said. "We wanted to make sure the fix that is chosen fixes it so we are not repairing it over and over again."

Department of Water Resources Board officials say they have not been asked yet for help, but are standing by in case a formal request is made.

Andrea Lobato, DWR manager of the Delta Levees Program with the Division of Flood Management said seepage does occur occasionally and agreed with Johnson that if there's a major breach it could affect the salinity of the fresh water.

"When an island floods, it would draw water in toward the island — there is always that symbiosis of fresh and saltwater mix, with a draw into a flooded island, that changes that fresh water," she said. "It could possibly pull more saline water in to the Delta."

Johnson said engineers considered building a berm and moving the Cunningham house at a cost of \$400,000. Another option was using vinyl sheet piles to shore up the hole, but they have a potential for breaking apart. That left them with the final option — using steel sheet piles to plug the hole, at a price tag of \$200,000.

"Because we are asking for funding from the state — the steel sheet piles are the viable option," he said, noting the district will request \$50,000 in one-time state Flood Control Subventions Program money, and seek reimbursements later for the rest of the project.

East Bay Times

Vision for Concord Naval Weapons Station takes shape; developer to draft ‘specific plan’



A view of the Concord Naval Weapons Station land is seen during a community and city employee tour in Concord, Calif., on Wednesday, May 23, 2018. The city and the chosen reuse developer, Lennar Concord LLC, have agreed to extend by a year the initial studies for development of the 2,300-acre area. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

By [Annie Sciacca](#) | asciacca@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: August 23, 2018 at 3:40 pm | UPDATED: **August 24, 2018** at 4:53 am

CONCORD — A vision for redevelopment of the Concord Naval Weapons Station is coming into focus and a plan could be ready by early next year, according to city officials.

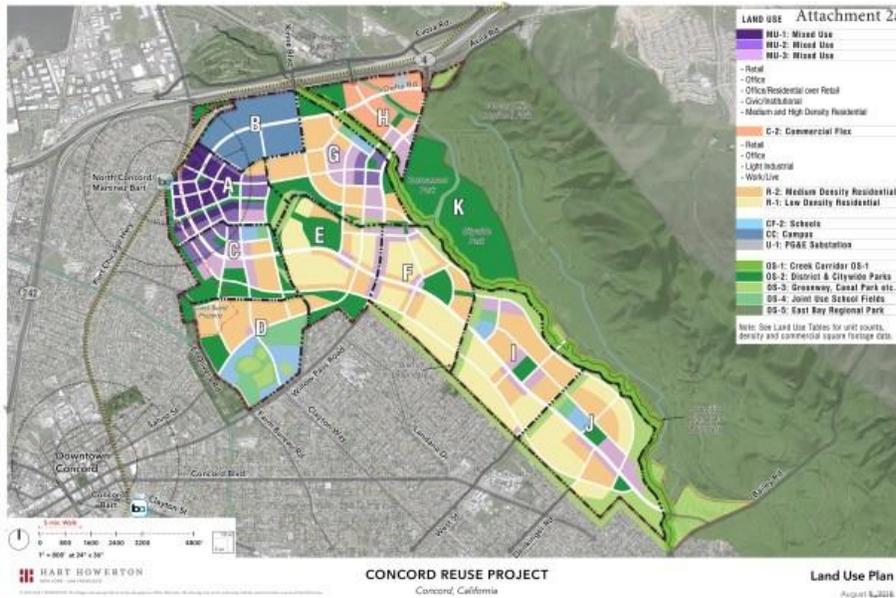
With that goal in mind, the Concord City Council on Wednesday directed developer Lennar Corp. to draft a specific plan and do an environmental analyses of the proposed redevelopment.

The specific plan will be based on a land use document staff presented to the council that envisions 13,000 housing units, including 800 units to be built on former Coast Guard-owned property adjacent to the naval weapons station site and 360 units next to BART.

Construction is planned in three phases, with 4,392 housing units in the first phase, 4,241 in the second phase and 3,207 in the third phase. Construction won't begin any time soon, however.

Guy Bjerke, the city's director of the Concord Reuse Project, said Lennar likely will bring a specific plan draft back to the council and the public in February 2019 and an environmental

analysis by June 2019. At those times, he said, there will be more opportunity for the council and public to provide input.



A map of the land use plan for redevelopment of the former Concord Naval Weapons Station shows the areas that will be dedicated to housing, commercial, schools, parks and other elements of the development. (Hart Howerton/Courtesy of the City of Concord)

The decision comes after 18 months of collecting public input and questions for the specific plan at community sessions, council and planning commission meetings and various neighborhood workshops.

The overall project has been about 12 years in the making, and people from housing groups, business organizations, chambers of commerce and other interests noted that point Wednesday in urging the council to authorize Lennar to move forward with drafting the specific plan.

Almost 20 people spoke during the public comment section of the meeting, mostly in support of the mix of housing and commercial space laid out in the plan. According to the staff report, about 55 percent of the homes would be single-family and 45 percent multi-family; overall, 25 percent would be designated as affordable. The plan also calls for about 8.4 million square feet of either commercial or campus space (including office space on the BART-owned property) in three phases.

A couple of residents were wary about the proposed density in some areas of the project, particularly around the BART station in North Concord. Previous iterations of the plan did not account for the 800 housing units expected to go up on the Coast Guard property along East Olivera Road.

Vice Mayor Carlyn Obringer echoed their concerns, saying that without knowing how housing on the BART and Coast Guard properties will look, she wants the two properties to be studied further before a specific plan is prepared.

She also expressed concern that there may not be enough green space included in the plan for the dense housing and mixed-use property near BART.

Obringer was the only council member to vote against having Lennar now move forward with a specific plan. The other four council members — Tim McGallian, Ron Leone, Laura Hoffmeister and Mayor Edi Birsan — said the concerns can be addressed when the developer returns with a specific plan.

“We can’t be into micromanaging,” Birsan said. “We’re here to set big policy.”

The Sacramento Bee

Jolting California officials, Trump administration looks to rewrite rules for Delta water

By Dale Kasler

August 23, 2018 12:17 PM

Updated **August 24, 2018** 09:18 AM

The Trump administration is trying a bold new tactic to bring more water to Central Valley farmers — one that could come at the expense of millions of urban Southern Californians.

In an unprecedented move, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation served notice to California officials Aug. 17, stating it wants to renegotiate a landmark 1986 agreement governing the big federal and state water projects and how they pump water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to their member agencies in southern half of the state.

Reclamation's efforts could significantly alter the balance of power between the state and federal governments as they share control of the water that flows through the Delta. The estuary is the hub of California's complex north-to-south water delivery system.

The complicated 1986 deal requires both sides to surrender water at times from their reservoirs, to serve [Delta environmental needs](#) and other purposes. Now the feds want to keep more of their water on hand, for delivery to Valley farm-irrigation districts and other customers of the federal government's Central Valley Project, leaving less for the State Water Project. Experts say hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water could be at stake.

The two sides have been discussing possible revisions to the agreement for a while, and there's considerable uncertainty whether the feds can successfully wrest more water away from the state. But Reclamation's move is clearly ratcheting up tensions between state and federal officials over how to divide and deliver the state's precious water supply.

State officials "were hoping this day would not come," said Greg Gartrell, a Bay Area water policy expert with 30 years of experience in Delta issues.

The feds recently threatened to sue the state over a proposal to reallocate the flows on the San Joaquin River, [giving more water to fish](#) and less to Valley farmers. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, who oversees Reclamation, then ordered aides to [develop an action plan](#) aimed at "maximizing water deliveries" to agriculture and other Central Valley Project customers.

During the 2016 campaign, President Donald Trump told a [rally in Fresno](#) he would deliver more water to Valley farmers, who have struggled for years with reduced supplies.

Meanwhile, Central Valley Project and State Water Project members are in conflict over Gov. Jerry Brown's plans to build the Delta tunnels, which are supposed to ease the estuary's environmental troubles and enable both projects to pump water more reliably. So far the big farm-irrigation districts in the CVP have refused to help pay for the tunnels, increasing the burden on State Water Project agencies.

Now comes the attempt by Reclamation to rewrite the rules on Delta pumping. Although the two sides informally have been discussing revisions for two years, Reclamation's formal "notice of negotiation" landed the same day as Zinke's bluntly worded memo on water deliveries and sent a jolt through the halls of state government.

If the feds get their way in the Delta, there would be less water for the State Water Project and its most important customer: the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which serves 19 million residents of Los Angeles and surrounding areas. That leaves state officials anxious, experts say.

"You have 19 million people who are caught up in the State Water Project," said Sacramento water lawyer Stuart Somach, who helped negotiate the 1986 agreement while serving in the federal government. "If you have leverage over 19 million Californians ... you've got quite a bit of leverage."

San Francisco Chronicle

Climate change report: California to see 77 percent more land burned

[Kurtis Alexander](#) Aug. 27, 2018 Updated: **Aug. 27, 2018** 8:29 p.m.

This year's wildfire season is not the worst that California will see.

The number of large fires across the state will likely increase by 50 percent by the end of the century while the amount of land that burns annually will rise 77 percent, according to a new, far-reaching state report that seeks to document the impacts of climate change.

And the problems don't end here. California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment, released Monday by the governor's office with other state agencies, portrays a multiheaded threat that promises more wildfires at the same time that higher seas overrun beaches, less water fills state reservoirs and drier weather shrivels Central Valley crops.

"It's all of these things happening in combination. That's the scary part," said Bob Weisenmiller, chair of the California Energy Commission, one of the agencies that helped compile the report. "There were times when people thought we had the rest of the century to act on climate change. But climate change is upon us now, and we have to act right now."

The report draws on previously published studies about California's future and includes new research from dozens of scientists, all of whom underscore the state's numerous vulnerabilities in coming decades, even amid efforts to fight and adapt to climate change. Policies of the Trump administration, which has de-emphasized the reduction of planet-warming carbon dioxide, have only exacerbated matters.

"In California, facts and science still matter," said Gov. Jerry Brown in a prepared statement. "These findings are profoundly serious and will continue to guide us as we confront the apocalyptic threat of irreversible climate change."

Already, [wildfires are becoming fiercer](#), says LeRoy Westerling, a climate scientist at UC Merced and one of the contributors to the state assessment.

The deadly Carr Fire in Redding and the record-big Mendocino Complex near Clear Lake are among the blazes that have cumulatively charred 1.1 million acres in California this year — about as much land as the state of Delaware. It's more than three times the five-year average.

"We're on a trajectory of a lot more area burned than even what we've been projecting," Westerling said.

Westerling's new projections suggest fires of at least 25,000 acres will occur 50 percent more often by 2100 if greenhouse gas emissions continue at their current rate. Those projections are based on models that simulate higher temperatures and more variable rainfall, meaning longer dry spells.

While Westerling expects burned acreage to rise by the end of the century by 77 percent of the current average, some years will see nearly three times as much land go up in smoke, according to his research.

This dire forecast can be tempered, he said, if state and federal land managers [commit to more aggressive forest management](#), including precision thinning of woodlands and setting controlled fires. These strategies have long faced resistance, however, for reasons ranging from fear of damaging forests to complaints about smoke from prescribed burns.

Westerling's research suggests if 30 percent of the Sierra Nevada was appropriately managed, the amount of land that burns could drop nearly a third.

"We can totally do it," Westerling said. "It's all about political will."

The state report warns that if wildfires aren't mitigated, the impacts will cascade beyond the fire lines. Smoke will drive [more respiratory illness](#), the power grid will lose more lines and equipment to flames, and even the cost of homeownership will rise. The price of wildfire insurance, for example, is projected to increase 18 percent by 2055 as fires become more damaging.

California's water supply also faces risk of disruption, according to the report, threatening a \$46 billion agricultural economy and portending increased water restrictions in cities and towns.

The basic problem is snow. As temperatures warm, the Sierra snowpack that provides much of the state's water will melt earlier and become gradually more limited. By 2100, the snowmelt will be as much as 80 percent scarcer, the report said. That will mean less water flows into reservoirs in summer when demand is greatest.

"Our system was built for a different climate," said John Andrew, assistant deputy director for the California Department of Water Resources, which oversees the State Water Project and its nearly two dozen reservoirs.

While issues with water have been identified in older studies, the report provides new estimates for how much won't be available for export through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the state's water-supply hub: about 10 percent less will flow by 2060.

"It's not the end of the world," Andrew said, "but 10 percent in a system that's already strained is something to pay attention to."

In the future, Californians will have to rely less for their water on big reservoirs managed by the state and federal governments, the report advises, and more on local initiatives, from desalination plants to water recycling to conservation.

The dip in water supplies will come as the demand for water on agricultural lands will rise as a result of increased evaporation, by 8 percent by midcentury, according to the report. Nearly 70 percent of California's winemaking area is thought to be vulnerable.

The Climate Change Assessment also provides new projections for sea-level rise. Between 31 and 67 percent of Southern California beaches may wash away by the end of the century without large-scale intervention, according to the report.

Statewide damages from rising seas could approach \$18 billion by 2100.

The authors of the new assessment hope the report serves as a call for action as well as provides guidance on where the most immediate threats lie and ways to address them. The document updates scientific projections made in the prior assessment, in 2012, and contains new sections that pinpoint the problems of specific regions.

"The basic message is that changes are happening fast, and they're not good changes," said Weisenmiller, with the Energy Commission. "We need to rise to the challenge."

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Published September 5th, 2014

Firefighter strike teams face new challenges

By Nick Marnell



MOFD Capt. Jon Bensley, center, at the Carr Fire. Photo courtesy MOFD Firefighters Association

The Bay Area firefighters returning from deployments at the recent California wildfires agree: The fire behavior that they have seen this year is unlike anything they have ever witnessed.

Jon Bensley came home in August after eight days at the Carr Fire, a wildfire that burned more than 200,000 acres in Shasta and Trinity counties and caused 38,000 evacuations. "It was a big fire, but it was the behavior that put us all on edge," said the Moraga-Orinda Fire District captain. "We're always thinking about fire behavior, and trying to predict what we might see, but that surpassed anyone's expectations."

The fire created its own weather system, and produced a fire whirl - a tornado - with winds over 140 mph. The whirl remained on the ground for 30 minutes and reached a height of 18,000 feet, destroying property and killing three in Redding.

Capt. Brent Boling of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District was at a pizza shop with his crew in Redding when the fire tornado hit. "We got caught in evacuation traffic, on our way to base camp," Boling said. "Usually we're dealing with fire in the brush. The progression of this fire was house to house. You wouldn't expect that behavior."

"It reminds us to step back for a moment and think about what we are doing, and how best to serve the situation," said Bensley of the fire, which killed two firefighters. "It makes you re-evaluate the risks you are taking and how you are going to operate."

Both firefighters praised the community for its support. One boy wearing a firefighter outfit carried a sign along base camp every day thanking the crews, as did two young girls riding along on horseback. Families delivered food and treats to the camp. "You couldn't pay for a meal in Redding yourself," Bensley said.

Receiving encouraging cards from local residents helped cheer up the firefighters, many of whom were missing their families. "It's incredible what our families handle while we're gone," said Bensley, whose wife tends to a 5- and a 3-year-old, plus a 4-acre farm. "She says, 'As soon as you leave, the kids get sick, something breaks and I get forced to go to work. With no babysitter.' She's fighting the fire at home."

Boling has two daughters enrolled at Saint Mary's College. "It never ends being a dad," Boling said. While he worked on the strike team, one daughter on a trip with a friend called him when the headlights went out in her car. "She caught me on Face Time, with flames shooting in the background, and asked me to help her fix them. 'Ah, I'm a little busy now ...'" Boling told her to get a hotel room and deal with the headlights the next day, which she did.

For Boling, the Carr Fire was his 17th out-of-district assignment. "My first strike team, the Fountain Fire in Shasta County, remained in the Top 10 until the last two years," he said, emphasizing the ferocity and destruction of the recent wildfires. The Fountain Fire marked its 26th anniversary Aug. 20.

Bensley was on edge for most of his interview, not because he was uncomfortable sharing his story but because he had to wrap up his captain's workload at MOFD Station 43.

That night, he was leaving Orinda to work the Mendocino Complex Fire, the largest fire in California recorded history.

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[back](#)

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Published September 5th, 2014

MOFD chief offers strategies to cope with PG&E power shutdowns

By Nick Marnell

To allay concerns about power shutdowns that the Pacific Gas and Electric Company plans to institute during high fire-threat weather conditions, Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker outlined steps residents can take to ensure that they always receive proper emergency notifications and evacuation alerts. According to the utility, "For public safety, it may be necessary for us to temporarily turn off electricity to customers who are served by PG&E electric lines that run through extreme fire-threat areas." But if PG&E shuts down power, how will residents be made aware of an approaching fire or to evacuate, especially in the era of internet-based phone systems and hands-free phones?

Winnacker recommended the purchase of an uninterruptible power source, which for about \$75 will provide adequate power for up to six hours. "And that gives you your Wi-Fi connection," he said. He also suggested the purchase a battery-powered AM/FM/weather alert radio to receive notifications during a power outage. The chief said he found one on Amazon for \$29.

The chief eschewed the use of sirens. "They are not designed to reach into buildings to communicate what is going on outside," Winnacker said. Rather, he favors relying on the Contra Costa County Community Warning System, which provides automated phone calls, text messages and weather alerts and allows for targeted evacuations of those who face the highest risk. For residents who sign up for Reverse 911, a feature of the warning system, "We can determine to the lot where the emergency is," Winnacker said. The chief also recommended signing up for Nixle alerts, emergency notifications provided by public agencies.

PG&E said it will make every effort to contact customers in advance of a power shutdown. Customers can sign up for the alerts on the utility website.

The chief offered perspective on the utility's power shutdown policy. "There is very little likelihood that this will happen," Winnacker said. Even in this record-setting fire season, PG&E has not yet reached the threshold for a preemptive power shutdown anywhere in California.

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[back](#)

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