

San Francisco Chronicle

California braces for extreme 2021 wildfire season - it's very dry out there

[J.D. Morris](#)

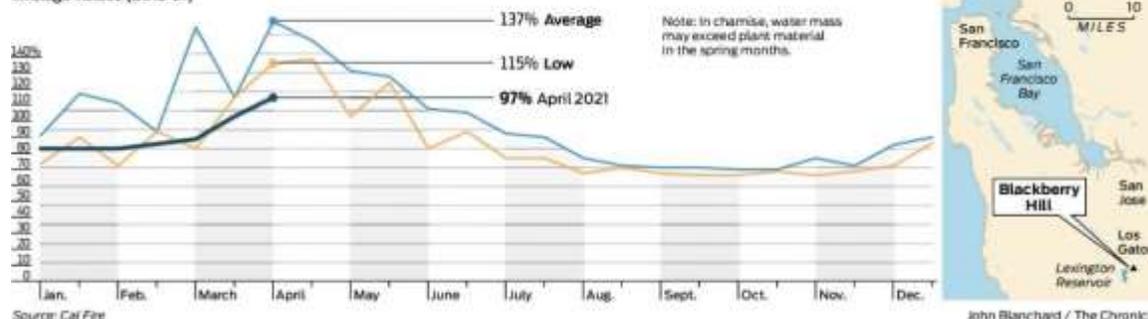
April 11, 2021 Updated: **April 12, 2021** 8:02 a.m.

They are highly flammable and abundant in wildland areas — and, for that reason, a bellwether to wildfire researchers. This month, a San Jose State University team analyzing moisture levels was shocked at what it found at study sites in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

At two locations researchers found no new growth to cut from the shrubs. It's an ominous sign of just how dry the vegetation is around California, where boundless numbers of plants and trees have been starved of life-sustaining water thanks to an entire winter of paltry precipitation. Those dry plants are fuel for wildfires, and they're primed to burn explosively.

Moisture content of the chamise plant at Blackberry Hill, Los Gatos

Average values (2013-21)



Craig Clements, director of San Jose State's Fire Weather Research Laboratory, said it was the first time he had ever found no new chamise growth to study. The plants are about as dry as they would normally be a few months from now, he said.

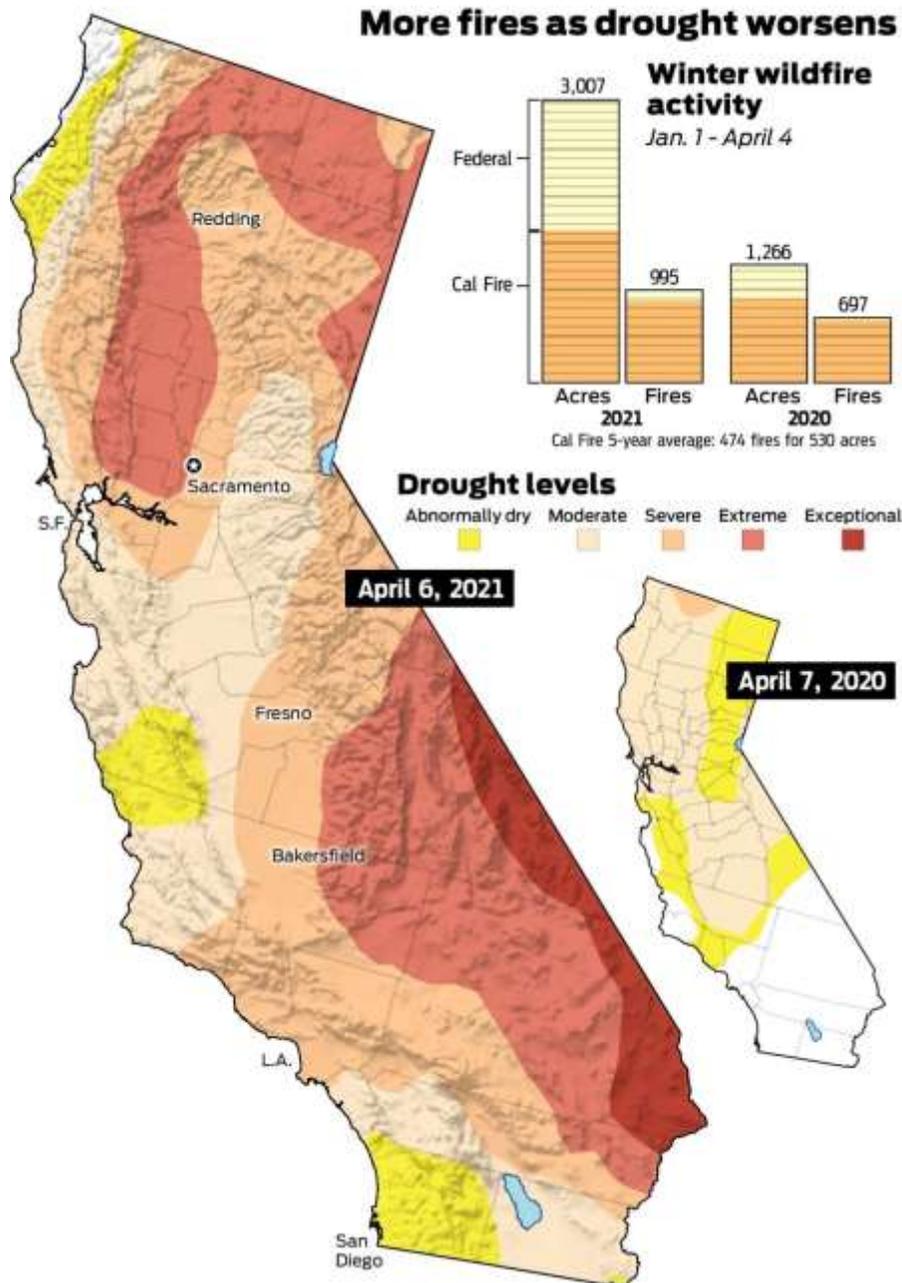
"The chamise was really, really problematic," Clements recalled. "They're not bringing enough soil moisture up into their woody stems to grow. They're remaining somewhat dormant."

To him, the implications are clear.

"We could have more intense fires earlier in the season, is what it suggests," Clements said.

California is barreling toward its driest and most fire-prone months, with many locations around the Bay Area and Central Coast having seen about 50% or less of their average precipitation levels for this time of year. And the time for improvement is rapidly ending, as the state's Mediterranean climate leaves essentially zero room for any substantial amount of rain or snow once April ends.

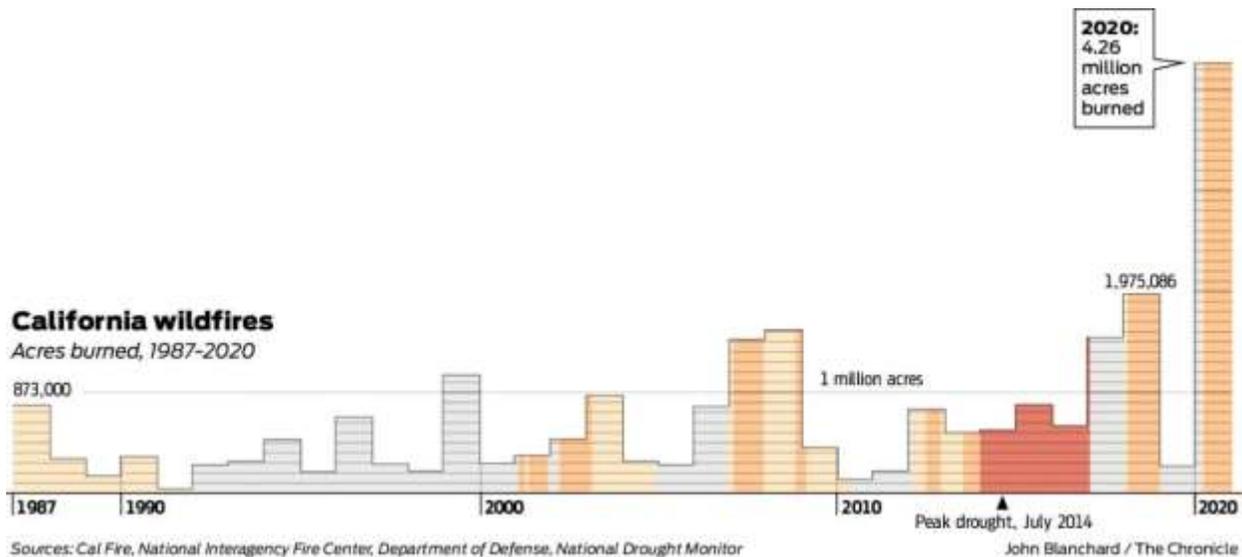
All but a small slice in the state's northwest is in some level of drought or, at a minimum, abnormally dry, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. The parched conditions result from two consecutive winters of abysmal precipitation. State officials have already warned of water supply shortages and pleaded with the public to conserve. At last one Bay Area water district is considering imposing restrictions.



The persistent dryness has already provided ample room for unusual fire activity. A spate of small fires started around Northern California in January, when Pacific Gas and Electric Co. also initiated its first-ever wintertime power shut-offs to prevent blazes. From the start of the year

through April 4, firefighters in the state have fought 995 fires that burned 3,007 acres — a huge increase from the 697 fires that burned 1,266 acres in the same time period last year.

It's the opposite of where the state's fire-weary residents would like to be after the unceasing flames that burned last summer and fall, at one point turning the Bay Area skies deep orange because so much smoke had blocked the sun. A record 4.2 million acres burned in California in 2020.



April's outlook suggests little reprieve is in store during the warmer months ahead.

“It’s extraordinary that there’s any fire risk in a lot of California right now, and yet here we are,” said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain. “Normally, this would be the least flammable time of year throughout most of California.”

Swain said the 2021 fire season is unlikely to surpass the severity of 2020, given the particularly unlucky combination of factors — little rain, a freak August lightning storm and unrelenting autumn winds — that made last year so bad.

“It was just such an extreme, anomalous outlier,” he said. “I think it’s statistically unlikely that we achieve that level, partly because it took a bunch of things coming together in the worst possible way.”

Scientists broadly agree that climate change is elevating California’s wildfire risks, as rising temperatures dry out vegetation and shift precipitation patterns. Of particular concern to Swain is recent research showing how California’s wet season is starting later, thereby extending the tail end of peak fire season.

In a [February commentary in Geophysical Research Letters](#), Swain wrote that the “growing correspondence” between the projections of climate models and actual precipitation in California

“increasingly suggests these trends are unlikely to have arisen by random chance, and will likely continue in the future with further climate warming.”

Swain said he’s not yet worried about the intensity of wildfires over the next two months or so, but starting around mid-July, the risk of extreme fire behavior could escalate. The threat could be compounded if autumn rains are again delayed into November or even December — especially when fast, dry winds blow from the northeast. Those conditions have given rise to some of California’s worst wildfires, including the November 2018 Camp Fire that virtually leveled the town of Paradise in Butte County.

In the Santa Cruz Mountains, the 2020 fire season never truly ended. The area was hit hard in August by the 86,000-acre CZU Lightning Complex fires, which killed one person and destroyed about 1,000 homes in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. Some of the anomalous January fires were within the footprint of the CZU burn scar, suggesting that winds whipped up embers that had smoldered into winter.

Another “sleeper spot” in the CZU burn scar was responsible for one of five fires extinguished by Cal Fire since the end of March. Several others were started by escaped controlled burn piles, officials said. Some required aircraft to suppress — a step not normally needed until June.

Though the blazes burned just a handful of acres, the fact they were able to gain any traction at all alarmed firefighters, who have now sped up their seasonal staffing increases.

“With the lack of precipitation, it’s very concerning,” said Ian Larkin, unit chief of Cal Fire’s San Mateo-Santa Cruz Unit. “We are a month ahead of schedule on our staffing.”

The state government has tried to get ahead of the looming threat by adding 1,400 firefighters and unveiling a \$536 million plan to fund vegetation thinning, forest health initiatives, grants to make homes fire resistant and other measures.

Speaking about the plan on Thursday at Fresno County’s Shaver Lake, where the monstrous Creek Fire ignited in September, state Natural Resources Agency Director Wade Crowfoot said, “We are just getting out of our second consecutive dry winter, and what we can expect this summer in wildfire conditions is more of the same.”

That’s an unsettling reality for parts of the state that have been repeatedly battered by fires in recent years. One of them is Sonoma County, which was hit by major wildfires in 2017, 2019 and 2020. Santa Rosa, the county’s largest city, had by early April recorded just 40% of its average rainfall for this time of year.

Another indication of the widespread dryness: County water managers said reservoir capacities are lower than they were at the height of the last drought.

“The general trend is, nothing is looking good,” said Marshall Turbeville, chief of the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District.

Turbeville said his greatest concern is forested areas, even though some of them just burned last year during the Walbridge Fire, which made up the west portion of the North Bay's gargantuan LNU Lightning Complex.

"It's gonna be the conifers, where those big logs are just not having the opportunity to accrue the wintertime moisture," he said. "I'm really worried about forest fires."

But the year's wildfire outlook is embedded with uncertainty. Dryness and heat aside, all wildfires need a spark, often caused by a human. No one can predict if and when the sparks will occur. In any case, Swain, the UCLA climate scientist, said the state will hopefully not endure an extremely rare dry lightning siege two years in a row, which would eliminate nature's most menacing ignition source.

Perhaps the greatest unknown is the force behind the deadliest of recent fiery catastrophes: the powerful gusts that propelled flames into places such as Santa Rosa and Paradise. Their frequency and severity are impossible to ascertain several months in advance. As always, the wind will be the wild card.

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Written By
[J.D. Morris](#)

J.D. Morris covers energy and climate change, focusing on such areas as the electric grid, renewables, carbon emissions and disasters, particularly wildfires and earthquakes.

Before joining The Chronicle, he was the Sonoma County government reporter for the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, where he was among the journalists awarded a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of the 2017 North Bay wildfires.

He was previously the casino industry reporter for the Las Vegas Sun. Raised in Monterey County and Bakersfield, he has a bachelor's degree in rhetoric from UC Berkeley.

Assemblymember Frazier Passes AB 903 to Dissolve Los Medanos Community Healthcare District

written by [ECT](#) Apr 17, 2021

SACRAMENTO, CA – This week, Assemblymember Jim Frazier (D-Fairfield) passed **AB 903** in the Assembly Local Government Committee.

“As all of you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed critical shortfalls in healthcare and health services funding across the state. Communities of color have been especially impacted by the emergency,” said Assemblymember Frazier. “Now more than ever, we have seen the life-changing impacts of devoting every possible dollar to serving those we represent. AB 903 is a district bill that takes strides towards addressing this issue. The bill effectively creates hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding for badly needed healthcare services in the region.”

AB 903 will dissolve the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District and require the County of Contra Costa to be the successor of all rights and responsibilities of the district. AB 903 will also require the county to complete a property tax transfer process to ensure the transfer of the district’s health-related ad valorem property tax revenues to the county in order to operate the Los Medanos Area Health Plan Grant Program.

The Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) has approved of the dissolution of the existing healthcare district, and Contra Costa County already serves the communities within district boundaries.

The Los Medanos Community Healthcare District (LMCHD) was formed in 1948 to operate the Los Medanos Community Hospital. In rural communities, such districts were created to provide for hospitals that otherwise would not exist. LMCHD operated the hospital until 1994 when the hospital closed due to bankruptcy. Since then, LMCHD has not provided any hospital, physician, or emergency medical services. Instead of providing direct services, LMCHD funds third-party agencies that provide health-related programs.

“This bill effectively creates hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding for badly needed healthcare services in the region. A lot of this funding comes from the savings on LMCHD’s extremely high administrative expenses, which topped 60% in some years,” said Assemblymember Frazier. “That is simply unconscionable.”

“Comparable programs in the county average at about 15% admin cost, and a nearby healthcare district runs at a maximum of 20% in admin costs. Rather than lose over half the funding to wasteful administrative expenses, AB 903 dedicates those dollars to the community,” Assemblymember Frazier added.

If approved by the legislature and signed by the Governor, a [bill](#) introduced by Assemblyman **Jim Frazier** (D-Fairfield) would dissolve the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District by February 1, 2022.

This comes after a 2017-18 Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report recommended dissolving the district as it pays more in administrative costs than it does administering grants. In 2019, **Lamar Thorpe**, who is

now the Mayor of Antioch, was appointed as the Executive Director of the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District. According to a [District agreement](#), he is making \$96,000 per year.

According to the [13-page Grand Jury Report](#):

- The Grand Jury also found LMCHD grant program administrative expenses are high compared to the amount spent on For example, in FY2016-2017, LMCHD spent 40% of its revenue on grants and 36% administering those grants, with the remaining 24% going to reserves. LMCHD's FY2017-2018 budget allocates 42% for grant programs, and 51% for grant program administration.
- The FY2017-2018 budget shows a general fund revenue of \$1.0 million. Of that amount,\$0.5 million is allocated to administrative overhead, \$0.4 million to community health programs, and \$0.1 million to reserves.
- The Grand Jury found no evidence that LMCHD collaborated with the County, non-profit hospitals, or other local entities to avoid duplication of services. Several organizations received grants from both the County and This duplication of services occurred because the County grant administrator, Keller Canyon Mitigation Fund, supports some of the same programs funded through LMCHD. If the County were to assume administration of LMCHD grant programs, there would be no duplication of administrative expenses because the County grant process is already in place.
- LMCHD receives nearly all its annual revenue from property taxes. It uses this revenue to pay for program and wellness grants, as well as administrative expenses.

In 2017, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to dissolve the District with Supervisor **Federal Glover** [stating](#) the time for a health care district board of directors has come and gone. LAFCO has also rejected the bid for the District to stay open, however, a judge allowed it Meanwhile, the hospital closed in 1994.

The [District](#) services Antioch, Bay Point, Clayton, Concord, Pittsburg and other local communities within the county. Frazier's bill ([AB 903](#)), which he has not responded to a request for comment, aims to put this debate to rest through State Law.

In response to the proposed bill:

Dear Assemblymember Frazier:

On behalf of the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District, I am writing to you in response to your introduction of AB 903

Given that 98 percent of our healthcare district does not fall within your assembly district, or the fact that you have never attempted to build a relationship with our board or programs, I am quite perplexed as to why you would introduce this legislation without attempting to understand how we serve eastern Contra Costa County.

This letter is not intended to be interpreted as an attempt to appeal to your reason or logic, as we are well aware of the fact that you are taking political orders from your top political advisor in an effort to turn our district into a political slush fund for one of your top allies on the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors.

Let me be clear in stating that, although to you this is simply a political game, to our healthcare district, you are jeopardizing a critical healthcare prevention lifeline for many in our community. From free reading glasses for children to HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, many of the community members we serve participate in our programs because they do not feel that they have their needs met via Contra Costa's public healthcare system.

Lastly, I have to state for the record that the manner by which you introduced this legislation has been interpreted to be highly disrespectful by both my board and community. I suspect that, if the makeup of our board were more in line with the makeup of the Oakley City Council, you would not have been as disrespectful as you have been to date.

Neither my board, nor my community will stand idly and accept to be treated in any manner less than the respect we deserve.

Sincerely,

*Patt Young
President, Los Medanos Community Healthcare District"*

AB 903 would:

Require the dissolution of the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District, as specified. The bill would require the County of Contra Costa to be successor of all rights and responsibilities of the district, and require the county to complete a property tax transfer process to ensure the transfer of the district's health-related ad valorem property tax revenues to the county in order to operate the Los Medanos Area Health Plan Grant Program. By requiring a higher level of service from the County of Contra Costa as described above, the bill would impose a state-mandated local program.

According to the Bill:

CHAPTER 11. Los Medanos Community Healthcare District Dissolution

32499.6.

(a) The Los Medanos Community Healthcare District shall hereby be dissolved, **effective February 1, 2022.**

(b) The County of Contra Costa shall be the successor to the district. All assets, rights, and responsibilities of the district are transferred to the county as the successor of the district. As of the effective date of dissolution, the county shall have ownership, possession, and control of all books, records, papers, offices, equipment, supplies, moneys, funds, appropriations, licenses, permits, entitlements, agreements, contracts, claims, judgments, land, and other assets and property, real or personal, owned or leased by, connected with the administration of, or held for the benefit or use of the district. Accounts payable and all other contract obligations shall be transferred to the county.

(c) The county shall complete all of the following by the effective date of dissolution:

(1) The county board of supervisors shall **form a Los Medanos Health Advisory Committee** that reports directly to the county board of supervisors and shall develop and conduct the Los Medanos Area Health Plan Grant Program focused on comprehensive health-related services. The county board of supervisors

shall appoint five members to the Los Medanos Health Advisory Committee. The Los Medanos Health Advisory Committee shall:

(A) Develop an area health plan that identifies major health disparities impacting residents in the district's territory and identify priorities for improving health outcomes.

(B) Solicit proposals from service providers interested in participating in the Los Medanos Area Health Plan Grant Program and that are capable of addressing the priorities in an adopted health plan.

(C) Monitor the efficacy of the programs to which grants are made.

(D) Report to the county board of supervisors not less than once a year on the execution of a health plan and the status of the grant program.

(2) The county board of supervisors shall commence and complete a property tax transfer process as outlined in Article 5 (commencing with Section 99) of Chapter 6 of Part 0.5 of Division 1 of the Revenue and Taxation Code to transfer the district's health-related ad valorem property tax revenues to the county.

(3) The county board of supervisors shall direct the auditor-controller to establish a new special fund for the countytreasure to track the receipt and disbursement of ad valorem property tax revenues received by the county pursuant the property tax transfer process.

(4) The Los Medanos Area Health Plan Grant Program shall be funded by ad valorem property tax funds received by the county as a result of the dissolution of the district and any other funds made available to the program.

(5) The county shall accept all real and personal property, books, records, papers, offices, equipment, supplies, moneys, funds, appropriations, licenses, permits, entitlements, agreements, contracts, claims, judgements, and all other assets and obligations transferred from the district in "as-is" condition, without any payment or repair obligations from the district.

SEC. 2.

The Legislature finds and declares that a special statute is necessary and that a general statute cannot be made applicable within the meaning of Section 16 of Article IV of the California Constitution because of the unique circumstances surrounding the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District.

SEC. 3.

No reimbursement is required by this act pursuant to Section 6 of Article XIII B of the California Constitution because a local agency or school district has the authority to levy service charges, fees, or assessments sufficient to pay for the program or level of service mandated by this act, within the meaning of Section 17556 of the Government Code.

Fire district gets \$500,000 boost for training exercises

By Judith Prieve

jprieve@

bayareanewsgroup.com

East Contra Costa Fire Protection District received a long-awaited \$500,000 check Friday to help it build a mobile fire training unit.

Assemblyman Jim Frazier, D-Fairfield, presented the check to the fire board nearly two years after he started pushing for the state budget allocation. A state spending freeze and setbacks associated with the coronavirus pandemic contributed to the delay, according to officials.

“Nothing is more important than continuing training assistance for our firefighter personnel, especially in this age of devastating fires,” Frazier said in a written statement.

Brian Oftedal, president of the fire board, applauded the additional funding.

“East Contra Costa Fire has never had a dedicated training facility in the history of the organization,” he said. “They have always had to be innovative, using dilapidated houses, parking structures, whatever they could find to do the training.”

The new dedicated facility will not only allow firefighters to do live fire training but also to practice rescue skills and throw ladders. There will be enough space for mandated emergency medical training as well, Oftedal said.

Although the district has yet to secure a site for the new training tower, Oftedal said it likely will resume talks with Ironhouse Sanitary District to use a portion

of its land in Oakley.

“Now that the monies have been secured, we can start that conversation back up,” he said.

“With the district’s limited resources of only three stations available to respond to fires, our Prevention Division works to eliminate all potential fires within the district,” Fire Marshal Steve Aubert said in a statement.

The fire district’s three active fire stations — in Oakley Brentwood and Discovery Bay — serve 250 square miles and 128,000 residents. Another fire station has been built on East Cypress Road in Oakley, but the money to staff it has not been available.

That station is projected to open in March 2022.

Contact Judith Prieve at 925-779-7178.

Group sues city to stop large hillside development

PITTSBURG

By Judith Prieve

jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com

Saying it would forever change “the beautiful hills” of the southern Pittsburg area, the environmental group Save Mount Diablo has filed a lawsuit challenging the city’s approval of a planned 1,500-home project.

The group contends the housing project by Faria Land Investors, a Seeno Homes/Discovery Builders company, would mar the hills between Pittsburg and Concord, which is home to rare habitat.

“Save Mount Diablo is simply trying to protect one of the East Bay’s most prominent and well-known ridgelines,” said Ted Clement, Save Mount Diablo’s executive director. “If we do nothing, massive grading will take place, the project will be built, the ridge damaged, other natural resources including scenic vistas will be harmed, and the new regional

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Pittsburg

FROM PAGE 1

park, which we advocated for over many years, will be negatively impacted.” Plans to develop the hills date back to 2005 when voter-approved Measure P moved the Faria site within Pittsburg’s urban boundary. The city approved an agreement with the developer that established guidelines for a permanent greenbelt buffer along the inner edges of the boundary.

The Concord-based developer filed an application in 2010, modified it in 2014 and again in 2017, then resurrected its plans in 2020. Three months ago, on Feb. 22, the Pittsburg City Council approved the 1,500-unit residential housing project.

The subdivision will be clustered in valleys of the ridgeline and hillside grazing land in what is currently unincorporated Contra Costa County, immediately south of Pittsburg.

The extensive grading required for development would increase the potential for landslides and degrade creeks and streams, according to Save Mount Diablo. The subdivision also would strain Pittsburg’s firefighting services, the group says.

“Throughout the East Bay, residents have worked hard to protect our ridges and views and to defend our parks. Pittsburg residents deserve the same protections and quality of life,” Clement said.

approval of this project, the Pittsburg Planning Commission recommended approval of this project, and the City Council voted unanimously to approve this project.” Colopy also argued that the project was consistent with the city’s General Plan, which “has long provided for this land to be developed for housing.” “Given the city and their consultant diligently analyzed potential impacts of this project, my client is not concerned with this poorly drafted and baseless lawsuit filed solely for the purpose of delay,” he said.

Earlier, the East Bay Regional Park District also objected to the project, part of which would lie just above its planned 2,540-acre regional park at the former Concord Naval Weapons Station.

In turn, Seeno and Discovery Builders last summer counter-sued the park district, alleging its proposed park would impact the housing development, although it didn’t specify how.

A Save Mount Diablo spokesman said the group doesn’t oppose all growth. Pittsburg has thousands of housing units already approved but not yet built, including units at Seeno’s San Marco, Sky Ranch II, Montreux and Tuscany Meadows projects. But the nonprofit said a smaller, more compact Faria plan would better protect the ridgeline and could allow the new regional park to expand to the Pittsburg side, giving residents better access.

In an earlier interview, Save Mount Diablo senior land use manager Juan Pablo Galván noted that the "whole area is a wind tunnel," adding that "fire plus wind equals a bad situation." Save Mount Diablo maintains that the Faria project violates Pittsburg's General Plan, California planning and zoning laws and the California Environmental Quality Act because its numerous impacts on the environment, including biological resources, water supply, wildfire, traffic and land use, wasn't adequately analyzed.

The city did not respond to requests for comment, but attorneys for Albert Seeno III's Discovery Builders said Pittsburg and its environmental consultant did "a comprehensive and extensive analysis of potential impacts of this project." "Their work was thorough and well done," attorney James Colopy, of Farella Braun+Martel LLP, said. "Following that analysis, planning and engineering staff at the city recommended

According to Pittsburg's current project pipeline list, there are 5,853 housing units approved or under construction, 88% of them by Seeno's Discovery Builders.

Before the Faria project can be built, however, the Local Agency Formation Commission must first approve the annexation of the land in unincorporated Pittsburg. *Contact Judith Prieve at 925-779-7178.*



A lawsuit was filed against the city of Pittsburg challenging its approval of a housing project in its southern hills.

PHOTO BY SCOTT HEIN — SAVE MOUNT DIABLO

NEWS > HOUSING • News

Pittsburg approves plan to build 1,500 hillside homes

Critics said the hills, wildlife and views should be protected; others say project will bring tax dollars, jobs



Scott Hein

The hills southwest of the Pittsburg city border are seen beyond the San Marco development. Concord-based Discovery Builders is seeking approval from Pittsburg for its plan to build up to 1,500 homes in the area. (Scott Hein)

By **JUDITH PRIEVE** | jprieve@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: February 23, 2021 at 9:21 a.m. | UPDATED: February 24, 2021 at 8:38 p.m.



A Concord developer's long-planned proposal to build as many as 1,500 homes in the southwest hills of Pittsburg received the City Council's unanimous nod Monday despite opposition from environmentalists, preservationists and some residents.

To allow Faria Land Investors to build homes on the hillside, the council had to approve its master plan, a development agreement and an amendment to the city's general plan.

The council also signed off on environmental documents for the project, which envisions construction of homes on 341 acres clustered in valleys and the preservation of 265 acres of open space. Minimum lot size of the low-density project would be 4,000 square feet, though many would be much larger than that, according to Faria Land Investors, a Seeno/Discovery Builders Inc. company.

"We know this is going to be a very nice community," Discovery Builders President Louis Parsons said, noting the ridge lines will be preserved.

As part of the deal, the project will also include long sought commercial development, a youth recreation center and trails that might connect to the East Bay Regional Park District's future park at the former Concord Naval Weapons Basin, he said.

"It's going to be a great location," Parsons said. "It's going to be nestled in these valleys and we think it's going to be a great place for executives and people of all types to live."

Plans to develop the hills date back to 2005 when voter-approved Measure P placed the Faria site within Pittsburg's urban boundary. The city approved an agreement with Seeno that established guidelines for a permanent greenbelt buffer along the inner edges of the boundary.

The Concord-based developer filed an application in 2010, then modified it in 2014 and again in 2017 before resurrecting it in 2020. And although the Planning Commission recommended approval last summer, the hearing was continued shortly thereafter when a council member fell ill.

Then and now, critics have said the developer has not provided enough detail to assess the project's impacts.

Opponents also said the project will destroy the natural beauty of the area, impact wildlife, snarl traffic and increase fire risks. Groups opposing it included the East Bay Regional Park District, Save Mount Diablo, Greenbelt Alliance and Pittsburg Youth Action.



Juan Pablo Galván, Save Mount Diablo's land use manager, said the proposal lacks an adequate project description and enforceable mitigation measures.

"Hundreds of Pittsburg residents have submitted comments on this project pointing to the need to protect Pittsburg's hills and wildlife habitat, address existing serious traffic issues and present to the public a complete description and analysis of this project," he said. "... It shows a complete disregard for the environment."

Galván and many others also warned of potential fire danger.

"It is an extremely windy area and you can't have much even in the way of trees ... and fire plus wind equals a bad situation," he said.

Zoe Siegel of Greenbelt Alliance also strongly urged the council to reject the proposal.

"A lot has changed in the past 20 years and we know a lot more now about the impacts of climate change," she said. "... Developments of this kind will put your community and our region at greater risks of climate change."

Pittsburg resident Mark Linde pointed to the potential impacts on local owls, turtles, frogs and bees.

"Mitigation fees, developers fees and oversight just can't remedy the insurmountable damage this development will do to the environment and mankind alike," he said.

William Goodwin, a housing advocate, questioned the developer's plan to build small accessory dwelling units or tiny homes instead of 150 affordable but comparable units, as the city's inclusionary housing program mandates.

"Is it not enough that we are in the middle of an affordable housing crisis, a recession and a pandemic when many families are suffering?" he asked. "No, this developer wants to cut an estimated \$60 million off their bottom line at the expense of affordable housing for the people of Pittsburg."

Among those supporting the project was former council member Pete Longmire. "It will bring millions of dollars in impact fees that will support our basic infrastructure like traffic, fire, police and other contributions," he said.

"This could be a turning point for our community to bring a lot of opportunities," he added.

Also for the project were various unions and residents who noted it would bring good-paying construction jobs.



Some council members questioned whether the project's open spaces would connect with the trails and staging areas of the future regional park over the hill in Concord.

"I want to make sure we comply on both sides to that commitment," Councilman Juan Banales said, suggesting that such a pledge be included in the agreement while voicing his support of the project overall.

Mayor Merl Craft said the council must look at the entire community it serves.

"We want to see what others have in their communities and we want these amenities as well," she said. "Upscale development means we can attract businesses, a grocery store. We will no longer be a food desert. Sometimes we have to say, 'what about us?'"

Craft added that the city already has 1,098 affordable housing units. "We are always looking to expand our housing stock. We need to have dollars in our community.

The development is expected to generate about \$2.75 million a year in property taxes for the city as well as \$1.1 million a year for public safety, \$122,000 for the fire district, \$153,000 for landscape and lighting and \$133,00 for park maintenance.

"All of these won't happen without the Faria project," she said.

"This was a big undertaking," Councilman Jelani Killings said. "You aren't taking away land. The reality is this was already designated by the voters of Pittsburg in the past (with Measure P)... The reality is it is development that pays for infrastructure."

"Another thing is it is close to BART," Councilwoman Shanelle Scales-Preston added. "I think the community benefit is huge compared to when this project was looked at 10 years ago."





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 **The Trust Project**

Tags: [East Bay Regional Park District](#), [Housing Development](#), [Regional](#)

Judith Prieve | East County journalist

Judith Prieve is an East Bay journalist. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she has worked as a reporter, features editor and assistant metro editor at newspapers in Wisconsin and Northern California and has been at what is now the Bay Area News Group for more than 25 years.

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California's first community choice aggregator, MCE, built the Solar One project in Richmond to provide local solar power and green jobs to the community. The 10.5-megawatt, 60-acre solar farm produces enough electricity to power almost 4,000 local homes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MCE

Americans want more renewable energy. Can ‘community choice’ help them get it?

Frustrated by slow uptake of renewable power sources, some communities are taking their power needs into their own hands.

BY ALEJANDRA BORUNDA PUBLISHED APRIL 20, 2021

The problem, as Dawn Weisz saw it back in the mid-2000s, was straightforward. She and other residents of Marin County wanted green power. But only 16 percent of the electricity that PG&E, the local utility, was delivering to its 250,000 customers was [renewable](#).

Frustratingly, Weisz and other community members didn't have any say about what went into that mix. The county government—for which Weisz worked at the time—had set ambitious decarbonization goals and had found that cleaning up their power supply would be the best first step forward. But they couldn't force the utility to go green any faster.

So she and others organized to form a “community choice aggregator,” or CCA—a nonprofit that took over buying electricity for Marin from a variety of producers. Within a year they were providing 50 percent renewable power to nearly everyone in the county. Today, 10 years after its founding, Marin Clean Energy, (now known as MCE since they serve more than just Marin), has expanded to cover more than a million people and provides just over [60 percent renewable power](#).

“To double, and then triple the amount of renewable content people are getting really had a dramatic impact on our carbon footprint, and that was really our goal,” Weisz says.

Marin is at the vanguard of a trend. The model of using CCAs as an environmental force has spread rapidly in recent years in the [nine states](#) where the law currently allows them; six other states are considering CCA legislation. Nationwide, some 100 CCAs are offering green electricity alternatives. The ones in California alone have 11 million customers.

“There is huge unmet demand for renewable energy,” says Kelly Trumbull, a researcher at UCLA who has analyzed California's CCAs. “Especially as the climate crisis gets worse, people are looking for ways to help move the transition forward.”

By popular demand

Polling confirms Trumbull's point: Americans really, really want green energy. Pew Research Center surveys show that 79 percent of respondents, across political lines, want the U.S. to develop more alternative energy resources, such as solar and wind. That support has increased [more than 15 percentage points since 2011](#).

Today, the power sector accounts for about 30 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Its emissions have decreased about 8 percent over the last decade, as coal plants retired and renewable sources grew, buoyed by their plummeting cost. Photovoltaic power, for example, has gotten [82 percent cheaper since 2010](#).

And yet the energy transition hasn't been moving nearly fast enough to reach [net-zero emissions by 2050](#)—the goal scientists say is necessary in order to keep the planet from warming beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius, and the goal the Biden administration has now adopted for the United States. Even in California, which [in 2006 first instituted climate goals](#) that forced utilities to increase renewable power generation every year, those increases have been slow compared to the rate scientists recommend and many concerned citizens are demanding.

“There's definitely this grassroots interest in procuring renewable energy,” says Michelle Davis, a solar expert at energy research firm Wood Mackenzie. “Customers are really wanting to take more control over their power.”

Some who can afford it put solar panels on their homes, supplying their own electricity needs and perhaps even feeding some back to the grid. Others have banded together to form community solar “gardens” that do the same. But most Americans still have little ability to influence the greenness of their power, and by extension little clout with which to accelerate the transition from fossil fuels to renewables.

What's a CCA?

In CCAs, Weisz and others like her have found a tool that can help. Community choice aggregation lets a city, county, or a group of them take over the role of buying power for the community.

In states like California with so-called regulated electricity, utilities such as PG&E have traditionally had three distinct roles: *buying power* from generating plants; building and maintaining the *transmission* lines; and *providing service* to consumers. In other states like Massachusetts, which have “restructured” systems, utilities run the transmission and customer-service sides, but customers can choose from different power suppliers.

In both regulated and restructured states, provided a state law allows it, CCAs can take over the power-buying part of the process. Once a local government chooses to form or join a CCA, everyone in the service territory is automatically opted in (though they can choose to leave if they like). By grouping together lots of customers, a CCA gets more negotiating leverage.

Unlike utilities, CCAs are nonprofits and are governed locally, which advocates say makes them more reflective of the community's needs and desires. When they first emerged in the 1990s, they were mostly used to negotiate lower electricity rates; in states like Ohio and Illinois, that's still the primary goal for many CCAs.

But in California, CCAs started to use them explicitly to forward climate goals.

At first, adoption was slow. MCE formed in 2010 despite vigorous opposition from utilities. The next to form was Sonoma Clean Power, in 2014. “There’s been almost exponential growth since then,” says Trumbull. Now, 23 CCAs across the state are in charge of buying power for more than 11 million people—nearly a third of California residents.

“It’s not just California—we’re seeing rapid growth in Massachusetts and other states,” including heavily populated New York, says Joseph Nyangon, an energy economist at the University of Delaware. Legislation that would enable CCAs is in discussion from Arizona to Maryland.

“I would bet that several more have this by next year, and that could be quite significant for the [renewables] market,” Nyangon says.

Emissions impacts

So, are CCAs accelerating the energy transition? A recent [UCLA report](#) led by Trumbull suggests that in California, the answer is yes.

In 2018 the state updated its renewables goals, aiming to reach 100 percent carbon-free power by 2045, with an [interim goal of 33 percent by 2020](#). Almost all the California CCAs exceeded that interim goal: In 2019, they provided an average of about 50 percent renewable power, whereas large utilities averaged less than 40 percent (though they too exceeded the state goal). The UCLA report found that CCAs indirectly nudged the utilities into a more renewables-heavy energy mix, primarily because as customers leave the utilities for CCAs, the utilities—which still have green power contracts in hand—end up with more renewable energy serving their smaller customer base.

In total, CCAs caused nearly 50 million megawatt hours of renewables to be used in place of fossil fuel sources between 2011 and 2019. That contribution is still relatively small—California uses about [five times that much electricity](#) each year—but it’s expected to grow quickly: By the end of 2021, more than 40 percent of the state’s customers will likely be part of a CCA.

Several of the newer CCAs, such as southern California’s Clean Power Alliance, default their customers into 100 percent renewable power. Some 93 percent of the Alliance’s three million customers stick with that option, which pushes up demand for renewables and helps to “put steel in the ground,” says Ted Bardacke, the executive director. Across the state, CCAs have contracted for about 6,000 megawatts of new solar, wind, and other renewables projects, according to the trade association CalCCA.

California is going to get to 100 percent renewables one way or another, but “it’s safe to say that the CCAs are going to accelerate that,” says Eric O’Shaughnessy, an energy researcher with Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

Nationally, the scale of CCAs’ potential is less clear. They have become the primary tool people use to get greener power than that required by their own state, O’Shaughnessy and colleagues found in a 2019 [analysis](#); in 2017, about 100 of the nation’s roughly 750 CCAs offered greener options than state baseline. Most of them were still focused on getting cheaper power rather than driving down emissions—though, as Nyangon notes, today those often go hand in hand.

If the states with CCA laws on the books continued to expand their green power customer base, and if the states considering CCA legislation pass it and follow in the same pattern, O’Shaughnessy and his

colleagues calculated that they could provide about 20 to 30 million megawatt hours of extra renewable energy per year. That works out to about 2 percent of the national load.

GO DEEPER

- See how the [EPA explains CCAs](#).
- What's the [status of legislation in your state](#)?
- Learn how communities [can start CCAs](#).
- How can you design a CCA with [energy justice at its core](#)?

Given the scale of the climate challenge, every nudge helps, says Bardacke. “I don’t think it’s an either-or situation,” he says. “It’s and, and.”

Value beyond carbon

Along with clean energy, many communities have been calling for equity in the energy transition. Some have demanded that CCAs provide local jobs while pursuing renewables, or help make rooftop solar and energy efficiency measures available to residents who can’t afford them.

Richmond, California, north of Berkeley on San Francisco Bay, is a good example: It wanted both local solar power and good jobs for community members. So the city government asked MCE to develop a 10.5-megawatt solar farm right in town. They negotiated a cheap lease of an unused 60-acre parcel at the Chevron refinery (Chevron offered it as [part of a “modernization” effort](#) undertaken a few years after a disastrous refinery fire). In the end, nearly 60 percent of the workers who built the “Solar One” plant lived within city limits—including 41 trainees from a low-income workforce training program called RichmondBUILD.

Today, the refinery’s rust-red tanks loom from a hill overlooking the solar farm. During peak sunshine hours, the high-pitched whine of inverters—like a constantly ringing fire alarm—signals that solar energy is being transformed into electricity, enough to power about 3,900 local homes. Turkeys strut and jackrabbits hop among the steel racks supporting the 78,000 panels, half of which follow the arc of the sun overhead.

The site accounts for only a few percent of MCE’s peak load, but for Fred Lucero, the director of RichmondBUILD, the value goes beyond the energy produced. “With a project like Solar One, we were able to lift all the boats in the harbor,” he says.

State Assembly Passes Frazier Bill to Dissolve Los Medanos Community Healthcare District

written by [ECT](#) May 12, 2021



The Los Medanos Community Healthcare District is one step closer to being dissolved after the California State Assembly voted 70-0 to support a bill by Assemblyman Jim Frazier.

Assemblyman **Tim Grayson** (D-Concord) has signed on to be the principal Co-Author.

[AB 903](#) will dissolve the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District and require the County of Contra Costa to be the successor of all rights and responsibilities of the district. AB 903 will also require the county to complete a property tax transfer process to ensure the transfer of the district's health-related ad valorem property tax revenues to the county in order to operate the Los Medanos Area Health Plan Grant Program.

The Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) has approved of the dissolution of the existing healthcare district, and Contra Costa County already serves the communities within district boundaries.

The Los Medanos Community Healthcare District (LMCHD) was formed in 1948 to operate the Los Medanos Community Hospital. In rural communities, such districts were created to provide for hospitals that otherwise would not exist. LMCHD operated the hospital until 1994 when the hospital closed due to bankruptcy. Since then, LMCHD has not provided any hospital, physician, or emergency medical services. Instead of providing direct services, LMCHD funds third-party agencies that provide health-related programs.

“This bill effectively creates hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding for badly needed healthcare services in the region. A lot of this funding comes from the savings on LMCHD’s

extremely high administrative expenses, which topped 60% in some years,” said Assemblymember Frazier. “That is simply unconscionable.”

“Comparable programs in the county average at about 15% admin cost, and a nearby healthcare district runs at a maximum of 20% in admin costs. Rather than lose over half the funding to wasteful administrative expenses, AB 903 dedicates those dollars to the community,” Assemblymember Frazier added.

This comes after a 2017-18 Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report recommended dissolving the district as it pays more in administrative costs than it does administering grants. In 2019, **Lamar Thorpe**, who is now the Mayor of **Antioch**, was appointed as the Executive Director of the Los Medanos Community Healthcare District. According to a [District agreement](#), he is making \$96,000 per year.

According to the [13-page Grand Jury Report](#):

- The Grand Jury also found LMCHD grant program administrative expenses are high compared to the amount spent on For example, in FY2016-2017, LMCHD spent 40% of its revenue on grants and 36% administering those grants, with the remaining 24% going to reserves. LMCHD’s FY2017-2018 budget allocates 42% for grant programs, and 51% for grant program administration.
- The FY2017-2018 budget shows a general fund revenue of \$1.0 million. Of that amount, \$0.5 million is allocated to administrative overhead, \$0.4 million to community health programs, and \$0.1 million to reserves.
- The Grand Jury found no evidence that LMCHD collaborated with the County, non-profit hospitals, or other local entities to avoid duplication of services. Several organizations received grants from both the County and This duplication of services occurred because the County grant administrator, Keller Canyon Mitigation Fund, supports some of the same programs funded through LMCHD. If the County were to assume administration of LMCHD grant programs, there would be no duplication of administrative expenses because the County grant process is already in place.
- LMCHD receives nearly all its annual revenue from property taxes. It uses this revenue to pay for program and wellness grants, as well as administrative expenses.

In 2017, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to dissolve the District with Supervisor **Federal Glover** [stating](#) the time for a health care district board of directors has come and gone. LAFCO has also rejected the bid for the District to stay open, however, a judge allowed it. Meanwhile, the hospital closed in 1994.

The [District](#) services Antioch, Bay Point, Clayton, Concord, Pittsburg and other local communities within the county.

San Francisco Chronicle

California can fix its wildfire crisis - if politics don't get in the way

[J.D. Morris](#)

Oct. 2, 2020 Updated: **Oct. 8, 2020** 4:46 p.m.

Gov. Gavin Newsom stepped inside the hollow base of a majestic redwood tree in the Santa Cruz Mountains last month and marveled at the giant's ability to withstand a wildfire that ravaged the 118-year-old state park around him.

"How the hell do these things make it?" Newsom asked a park ranger.

The answer is that those trees evolved to endure a good burn. Fire is endemic to California. But the threat is changing now, thanks to the world's [warming climate and more than a century of poor forest management](#), among other reasons.

Newsom saw as much that day in September when he [toured the extensive fire damage](#) at Big Basin Redwoods, California's oldest state park.

It wasn't the first time he'd found himself in such a situation: Shortly after he was elected in 2018, Newsom and President Trump [walked](#) through the burned remains of Paradise, the Butte County town devastated by the historic Camp Fire.

About two weeks after Newsom's trip to Big Basin, he [met with Trump again](#). By then the state's fire season had intensified. Newsom urged the president to appreciate how "the plumbing of the world" had changed and that "climate change is real."

While the president has not embraced that reality, Newsom has since tried to press fast-forward on California's climate-change actions, betting they will help ease the endlessly growing threat of wildfires in the state.

He and other state officials have no time to waste.

California is burning more than ever, with a record 3.7 million acres blackened across the state so far and potentially weeks more of dangerous weather in store. The fiery crisis could quickly become a political one, too, as state leaders scramble to contain a worsening problem with myriad solutions, none of them easy to enact.

And it's not just a climate issue: To most effectively reduce the mounting risk of catastrophic wildfires, the state will need to grapple with its overgrown forests and misguided development patterns.

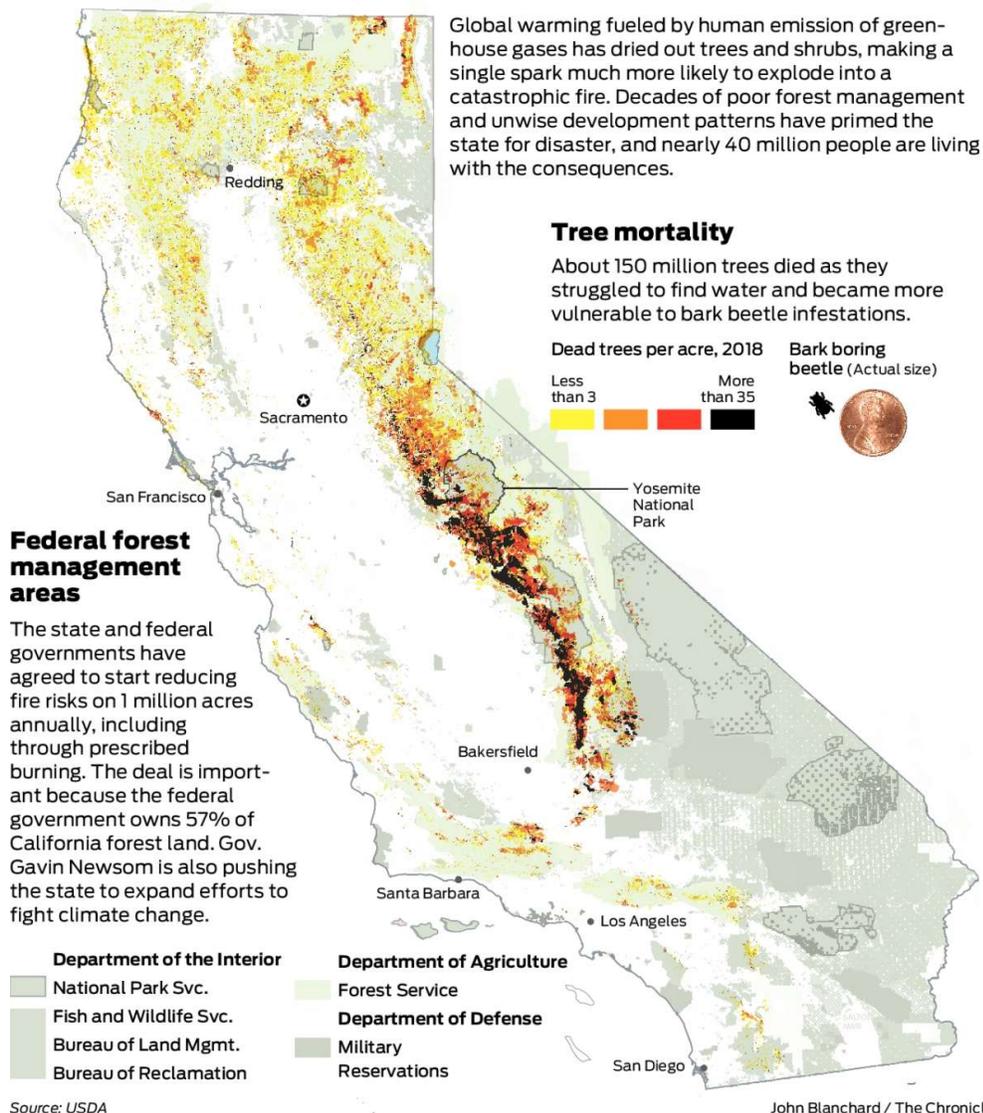
“We have not done enough,” said state Sen. Bill Dodd, D-Napa, who has taken a lead role in wildfire legislation in recent years as his district burned.

Politicians and policy experts broadly agree, though not necessarily on the best next steps. On the climate front, Newsom’s most ambitious measure was a recent executive order [prohibiting the sale of new gas-powered cars](#) by 2035.

He has also called for a ban on new permits for hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a controversial method of extracting oil and gas from the ground. Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, and two other lawmakers [said they will introduce such a bill](#) this year.

Much more is needed to prevent catastrophic fires, including more aggressive action to thin overgrown forests through measures such as controlled burns. California is trying to achieve that through a new partnership with the federal government that aims to reduce fire risks across 1 million acres of forest annually.

Fragile trees



But it will take years to achieve that goal, and a lot of reliable funding to maintain the endeavor in perpetuity. The state must also rethink its longstanding strategy of suppressing all fires, including nonthreatening ones that can help prevent places from burning more intensely later, said Henry McCann, a research associate at the Public Policy Institute of California.

Fireproofing homes in the riskiest regions is another urgent need, he said.

“There’s no slam dunk or silver bullet solution,” McCann said. “It’s an all-of-the-above type moment.”

Environmentalists have advocated for even stronger steps to protect the climate, and therefore lessen the risk of ruinous fires. Their ideas include moving up the state’s 2045 deadline to get all of its electricity from carbon-free sources and managing a responsible shift away from oil and gas production.

“We’ve got to stop being a drug dealer, essentially,” said Kathryn Phillips, director of the Sierra Club California.

Abandoning fossil fuel production would be a tough pill to swallow in places like Kern County, where oil and gas remain pillars of the economy. Petroleum is so woven into the culture of Bakersfield that the mascot of the city’s oldest high school, opened in 1893, is the drillers.

Newsom’s environmental policies face strong opposition from conservatives including Republican State Senate leader Shannon Grove, who represents Bakersfield.

“Republicans believe we need to have responsible forest management, not import oil from countries with appalling human rights violations that tear down rainforests and ignore environmental regulations,” Grove said in a statement to The Chronicle. “Californians deserve a governor with real solutions for issues that affect our families, not one who likes to grab headlines.”

Newsom has been cognizant of the difficulties in making a seismic economic shift.

“None of us are naive in the state of California, as a fossil fuel production state, that we need to focus on a just transition” for those who might otherwise lose work, Newsom said.

Part of the solution for places such as Kern County could be attracting electric vehicle manufacturing and renewable energy businesses, said Phillips of the Sierra Club.

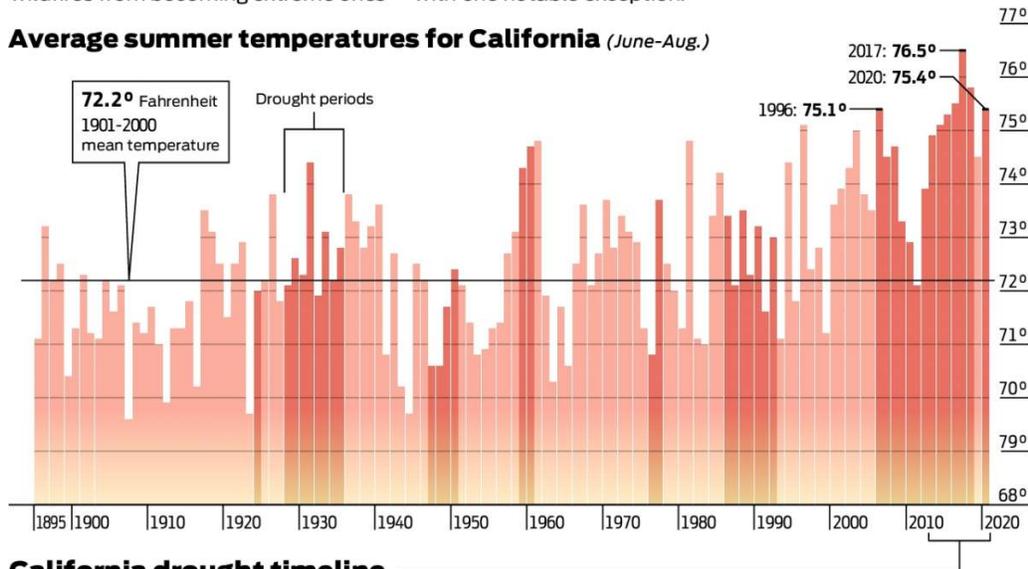
“The culture of oil is so embedded in the politics of the place that getting leadership there to think more broadly about how you develop a diverse, healthy economy has been a real struggle,” Phillips said.

Infrastructure investments will be essential as California tries to move toward a carbon-free electric grid, experts say.

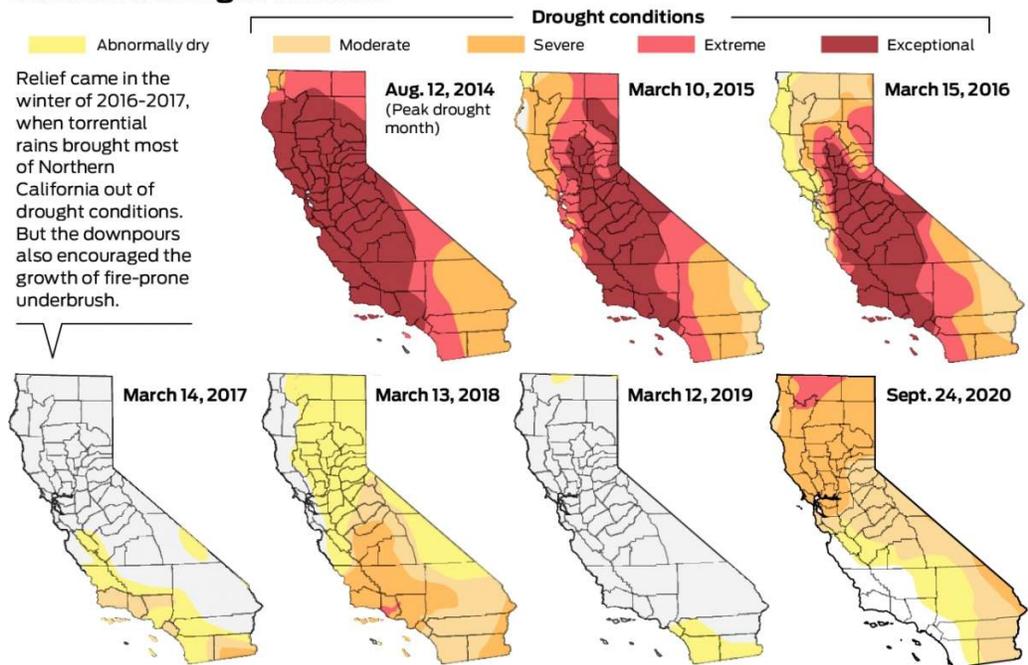
Rising temperatures, rising risks

Summer and fall in California have generally been getting warmer over time due to humans burning fossil fuels. The number of autumn days with high fire danger in the state has doubled since the early 1980s. Yet California got some reprieve in 2019, when another wet winter helped prevent most wildfires from becoming extreme ones — with one notable exception.

Average summer temperatures for California (June–Aug.)



California drought timeline



Sources: U.S. Drought Monitor, NOAA, drought.gov

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

The state has struggled in that area, suffering [rolling blackouts in August](#) caused by a power-supply shortage during a heat wave. State energy leaders [said](#) reliance on renewable power was not to blame but admitted that regulators may need to rethink rules governing electricity supplies and reserves. Others have [called for more spending on batteries](#) to store solar power for use when the sun does not shine.

“What we really need to be doing is building new stuff,” said Leah Stokes, a UC Santa Barbara professor with expertise in climate and energy policy. “We have to continue to create very strong incentives to build new, renewable energy as fast as possible.”

Paying for some of the needed efforts to lessen California’s wildfire burden will be a major challenge for state lawmakers in the years ahead. Dodd, the Napa state senator, said he might now be willing to support using revenue from the cap-and-trade program, through which large emitters can buy permits to release greenhouse gases, for fire-related issues.

“We don’t have an unlimited checkbook,” Dodd said. “What we’ve got to do is prioritize the existing money that we already have.”

The idea of spending climate funds on wildfires has been advocated before by Sen. John Moorlach, R-Costa Mesa (Orange County). Moorlach said the state must do more to reduce emissions from wildfires — a tricky dilemma. California’s history of fire means that [some amount of greenhouse gases from wildland blazes is natural](#).

This year, as of Sept. 24, fires had emitted an estimated 102.2 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, according to the California Air Resources Board. The tally is bigger than the equivalent metrics for fossil fuel pollutants from any sector except transportation in 2017, the most recent year available.

“If we’re serious about climate change, then neglecting addressing wildfires is disingenuous,” Moorlach said.

State lawmakers have also looked at ways to help homeowners cope with the greater risk of major wildfires. But progress has been modest.

State Assemblyman Jim Wood, D-Santa Rosa, introduced what he called a “big, audacious bill” in 2018 that intended to make homes in the highest-risk areas more resistant to fire — and set up a \$1 billion fund to help homeowners pay for retrofits.

The bill passed, but with watered-down language that did not go as far as Wood wanted. He said it “didn’t feel like Californians were ready for this,” a situation he called “really, really disappointing, because here we are again facing these fires.”

“I guess the challenge we really face here,” Wood added, “is that we have these fires in the fall, and then we come back in January and it’s raining and there’s something else to work on.”

California lawmakers need to recognize that “housing policy is climate change policy, or should be,” said state Assemblywoman Buffy Wicks, D-Oakland. Smarter laws dictating where and how homes are built — allowing for denser construction in urban cores, while improving public transit — can help the environment by reducing energy used in transportation, she said.

Wildfire is a familiar problem to Wicks, who grew up in the Sierra Nevada foothills of Placer County. Her father worked for the U.S. Forest Service for more than four decades and, though he retired years ago, still returns regularly to help fight fires, she said.

Wicks recalled walking her young daughter to school, just a few blocks away from their home, the day Bay Area skies turned an Armageddon orange because they were blanketed with so

“How do I explain to my 3-year-old that we basically destroyed the planet?” Wicks said.

She’s worried about the world her and others’ children will grow up in, in the absence of more decisive steps to address wildfires and climate change.

“Are they going to be living in an environment that allows them to go out and take a hike,” Wicks asked, “or are they going to grow up in a place where we have two or three months of toxic fumes that we’re all dealing with every single year?”

Wicks said she’s not deterred by the worsening fires, or California’s failure to solve other persistent problems. She has to keep pushing for bold policy changes, she said — she has no other choice.

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