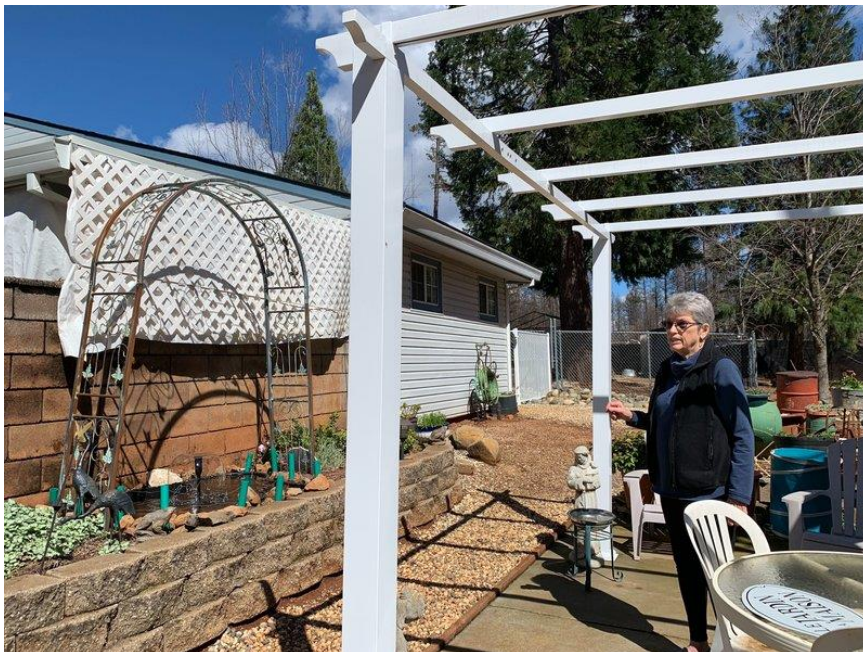


Paradise, Calif., Water Is Contaminated But Residents Are Moving Back Anyway

April 16, 2019 11:36 AM ET
Heard on [All Things Considered](#)

[Kirk Siegler](#)



Pat Zinn's home survived the Camp Fire. She moved back in a few months ago despite warnings that the water supply could be contaminated. She says her goldfish survived the fire and are still thriving in the water coming through the taps.
Kirk Siegler/NPR

Five months after the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history, the town of Paradise remains a disaster zone. Only 6 percent of the debris from last November's Camp Fire has been hauled away. Burned out skeletons of cars, piles of toxic rubble and blackened old-growth pine trees can still be seen everywhere.

Before the wildfire, the population of Paradise was about 26,000. Today, it's in the hundreds.

The extent of the latest crisis unfolding in Paradise is yet unknown: The deadly fire may also have contaminated up to 173 miles of pipeline in the town's water system with cancer-causing benzene and other volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. Preliminary results have shown contamination in about a third of the lines tested, though only about 2 percent of the entire system has been sampled.

Still, the water crisis is just the latest setback that has called into question whether the town was ready to reopen.

And some have had no choice but to move back.

"As soon as the house was cleaned, our insurance company told us that we had to come home," says Kyla Awalt.

Awalt's home off Bille Road is the only one still eerily standing in the rubble of what used to be her neighborhood. Her family had planned to move back, eventually. In January, though, they were notified that their "additional living expenses" had run out. But there was no potable water in town then, nor is there today.

They considered selling. But how do you put a home on the market if it doesn't have any water?

"You can't," Awalt says. "That's part of the inspection process."

So they bought a huge water tank, out of pocket, for \$6,500. It's sitting beneath the shade of an old walnut tree along the fence line of her property. On the other side of the fence is the rubble of what used to be her neighbor's home. There are piles of debris and a couple of mangled, burnt lawn mowers waiting to be hauled away.

The Awalts spend \$250 to fill the water tank every few weeks. It's expensive, but it's peace of mind.

"It's kind of up to the homeowner," Awalt says. "It's on them to figure it out."

Before the Camp Fire, Paradise was known as a bedroom community as well as an affordable haven for retirees. Much of the population tended to skew lower income, and the idea that they're now being left to fend for themselves is alarming to experts like Andrew Whelton.

"That's not protecting public health," says Whelton, a civil engineer who built his career advising the U.S. military on how to restore water infrastructure after disasters. "That's not what we're supposed to be doing with a population that has gone under trauma like this; we're supposed to help them."

Whelton, now at Purdue University, has recently been consulting with the town's primary water supplier, the Paradise Irrigation District. The utility is trying to pinpoint the source of the contamination, whether it's from burnt plastic pipes and meters or from the toxic waste from burnt structures that was flushed into the town's water pipes. Much of the town's housing stock was older and didn't have back-flow protection.

"The scale of the recovery effort and the testing that's needed in my experience here will be unprecedented," Whelton says.

It's likely unprecedented, but it's also a warning to other cities in high risk wildfire zones.

The district's manager, Kevin Phillips, says his staff is overwhelmed.

"There is no playbook for a wildfire that destroys a town and you have a depressurization of a system that creates contamination," Phillips says.

There are 10,500 service lines in the district's system, which was built in the 1950s and already had a reputation of being outdated and haphazardly designed. Phillips says the plan is to prioritize testing in neighborhoods where homes are still standing and to shut down and isolate the contaminated places.

The system will take years to fix. The testing alone could take more than two years.

"We feel like we are under the microscope of the nation right now, that we are going to be the reason why the town doesn't rebuild. ... If there's no water, there's no town," Phillips says.

But Phillips says they won't do anything hastily that would jeopardize public health. As more people try to move back, the utility hopes to buy and deliver tanks with potable water — a program will hopefully begin later this month. But no one knows yet who will pay for that.

Whelton worries that means folks living here will continue to be exposed to yet unknown risks.



Paradise Irrigation District manager Kevin Phillips shows a sample of the town's water pipes, which were frequently woven between underground root systems that were likely burned during the fire.
Kirk Siegler/NPR

"In a disaster of this scale, that is one of the takeaways here," he says. "In the absence of any credible authority providing help to a population, they will do what it takes to survive."

For now, there are strict warnings that people moving back in should not drink or even boil the water, let alone use it for any household activity unless it has been tested. Whelton says some

residents are buying water filtration systems that aren't proven to be safe enough to handle the high VOC readings, or they're relying on a single-point-in-time test for contaminants.

Seventy-nine-year-old Pat Zinn, whose home of four decades was spared, got her water tested three months ago. It showed the all clear.

"They did say it could change so I should have it retested, but it's \$100 every time you have it tested, so I guess I'm gambling," Zinn says.

Zinn is drinking the free bottled water, but she's using tap water for most everything else.

"Something's going to get me one of these days anyway," Zinn says. "So I'm not really that concerned about it."

She chuckles as she tries to make light of the latest setback in front of her town's recovery. She's mostly concerned about Paradise's survival, which she says hinges on its water crisis being solved.

"That's the big thing," she says. "If we don't have that taken care of the town is going to die."

The Sacramento Bee

A California town could finally get clean water – if its neighbor is willing to help

[By Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado](#)

April 22, 2019 04:29 PM, Updated 5 hours 19 minutes ago

The 80 homes that make up Tooleville nestle against the mighty Friant-Kern Canal, thousands of gallons of fresh water flowing each day past the two-street town.

But none of that water can help Tooleville's decades-old problem of contaminated water, chronicled at the start of this decade in a three-part series by The Bee on the San Joaquin Valley water crisis.

Nearby Exeter might, though, giving a rise of newfound hope.

The last year has proven to be the most productive in the town's battle. Members of the [Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association](#), with help from other organizations, have lobbied the neighboring [city of Exeter](#) for help. Last May, Exeter agreed to undergo a review of its own water system and consider a connection for Tooleville.

After years of unwillingness from city leaders, residents now hope the several parts in motion could soon fix Tooleville's troubles. Exeter City Council meetings are regularly attended by members of the water board along with other interested residents.

And they're getting help. Pedro Hernandez, policy advocate with [Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability](#), has intervened on behalf of Tooleville as it negotiates with its neighbor a mile to the west, a slow-moving process that residents are glad is at least a possibility.

Residents in Tooleville say they have felt a sense of relief ever since Leadership Counsel stepped in. They've also been aided by [Self-Help Enterprises](#). Delay after delay, it has been the outside help that has kept things moving forward in the tiring process, residents said.

"It's very hard to live in these conditions," said Yolanda Cuevas, a Tooleville resident and member of the Tooleville Mutual Nonprofit Water Association, the town's community-run water system. "If I had the money to move out, I would do it."

It's been almost one year since Cuevas and her husband Benjamin Cuevas Martinez moved into their home on Spruce Road. If they had known their water wouldn't be clean, they would have chosen to live elsewhere, they said.

The problem

Two recent [Consumer Confidence Reports](#) on Tooleville's water system indicated contaminants were present in the water, as they have been for years. Tooleville's location, an area with a high concentration of pesticides from surrounding citrus groves, doesn't help in combating the issue.

The most recent water assessment conducted by [Tulare County Department of Health Services](#) showed the town's water had nitrate levels above 5 milligrams per liter but under 10, a level that is in compliance with state and federal standards but still concerning to residents.

There were traces of coliform bacteria, a sign of sewage contamination, which has potential to cause diseases; the county report showed Tooleville's water system was out of compliance three months in 2017. The report also found a high volume of hexavalent chromium, an unregulated contaminant that experts believe can cause cancer if consumed over many years.

A bleach odor in the water and rashes that appear after showers are just some of the immediate problems with living with contaminated water, Cuevas said. During laundry, black clothes often lose their color. Rumors swirl that the water causes children's hair to thin. And cooking requires extra steps in order to avoid washing meats and vegetables with the kitchen sink water.

In past years, Tooleville has been close to getting state funds to address its water problem, only to be left in the dust each time due to technicalities beyond local control.

As a temporary remedy, residents get shipments of 5-gallon water jugs twice a month. That's the safe option for drinking and cooking. Cuevas said she even uses it to rinse herself after showering to wash away the contaminants that come through the pipes.

Those concerns have taken a mental toll on residents.

"It's very, very hard," Cuevas said. "Sometimes I get sad because I'm working and I'm not in the house to tell the kids, 'Don't drink that water,' and I'm just scared that they're going to go and wash the fruits with the faucet water and I'm not there to tell them not to do it. It's very stressful."

Last year, [a McClatchy analysis of data](#) from the State Water Resources Control Board found that an estimated 360,000 Californians are served by water systems with unsafe drinking water. The analysis also found that the problem was much broader when considering that 6 million Californians in the state were served by unsafe water at some point since 2012.

Residents in Tooleville have lived with the risks of unsafe water for much longer, and patience is running out. Residents here have one question in mind: Will their neighbor help them?

Two solutions

Two possible ways to fix Tooleville's water problems have emerged from a back-and-forth between Hernandez and Tooleville residents and the city of Exeter in the last year and half.

The first is an option for Exeter to bill Tooleville monthly for water it sells to the small town through a master meter plan. The residents in Tooleville would still manage their own water system under that plan.

The second option is for Exeter's full consolidation of Tooleville's water system. That would mean the Tooleville water board would dissolve and Exeter would manage the town's water.

Exeter City Administrator Adam Ennis said the city wants to help Tooleville, but the council doesn't yet know how it can. A shuffle in city staff over the years has also resulted in stalling. The latest moves, though, show the city is putting aside past concerns.

A private firm has been conducting a water master plan evaluation for several months. It's looking at Exeter's hydraulic infrastructure and analyzing its capacity to aid, in some way, Tooleville's water system.

"We're trying to go through and do a comprehensive look so we really know what we've got," Ennis said. "It's a pretty big deal, so we want to understand what's going to happen." He said new water infrastructure, such as a new water well and pipes, will inevitably be needed under any plan to help nearby Tooleville.

Ennis, like the Tulare Water Division, is expected to review the analysis by the private firm before it goes to the full Exeter City Council for review and possible vote.

Ennis said he's new to the job as city administrator and has had to catch up on the previous work. At a recent council meeting, he stepped outside to speak with concerned Tooleville residents. He told them progress was being made.

Hope in Tooleville

Thinking back to that moment, Cuevas' eyes well up.

"Nothing is going to happen if we don't do something about it," she said. "So we have to do something about it. Not just for us, but for the rest of the people that live here."

Those who make up the town's water board say they have begun to lose confidence in their own water system and no longer see benefit in managing it or charging residents for water they should not be using.

Luckily, the monthly water rate is \$40. The rate is seen as affordable since many residents have low income or are retired, like Olivera.

But there are still challenges in the small community.

The Tulare County Strategic Growth Council in 2017 assessed Tooleville and found the average income is \$29,455, lower than the county's average of \$42,031 and much lower than the state's average of \$61,818.

By those standards, Tooleville falls into the category of one of the state's "severely disadvantaged" communities. It's data like that which has the community members pushing for change.

"We really need something serious," said Maria Olivera, the secretary of the water board. "I am so tired, all this work that we have to do and the dirty water you can't use."

The Californian

San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission to revise planned policy changes on open space and agricultural land preservation

By
[Joe Naiman](#)

April 24, 2019

San Diego County's Local Agency Formation Commission has a policy on preserving open space and agricultural lands, and LAFCO staff had intended for the LAFCO board to send proposed updates to local agencies and other stakeholders for public review at the March 4 LAFCO meeting, but dissatisfaction with portions of the policy led to an alternate course. LAFCO initially planned to provide a revised proposed update at the April 8 board meeting, but the potential changes have now been postponed indefinitely.

"I think LAFCO is trying to assert itself much too far in this case," said LAFCO board public member Andy Vanderlaan. LAFCO is responsible for jurisdictional boundary changes including annexations, city incorporations, consolidations, detachments, and dissolutions.

"I think that this is just an overreach of this agency," said County Supervisor Jim Desmond. "I just see this as an overreach of LAFCO's orderly development clause. We shouldn't be taking on housing issues."

LAFCO initially adopted a policy on preservation of open space and agricultural lands in November 1978 and most recently amended that policy in November 1998.

The policy discourages proposals which would convert prime agricultural or open space lands to other uses unless that denial would not promote the planned orderly, efficient development of an area or unless the jurisdiction has identified all prime agricultural land within its sphere of influence and has adopted measures to preserve prime agricultural lands for agricultural uses. For cities the policy requires pre-zoning of territory to identify areas subject to agricultural preservation and planned development.

The policy also references procedures to define agricultural and open space lands and to determine if a proposal may adversely affect such lands.

The state's Department of Conservation inventories changes in land use within all of the state's 58 counties and publishes reports every two years. The report covering the 2014-16 period

indicated that San Diego County has 212,928 acres of important farmland. The County of San Diego's annual crop reports cite total commercial agriculture land of 268,582 acres in 2014, 251,147 acres in 2015, and 250,720 acres in 2016. The state report claims that San Diego's loss of prime farmland has been three times the statewide rate since 1992.

Six amendments were proposed by LAFCO staff for the update: a new policy statement to coordinate with land use authorities to reduce the current average annual loss by one-half by 2040, eliminating the requirement for cities to pre-zone territory to demonstrate specific land uses (the elimination would be due to redundancy since current LAFCO law requires cities to pre-zone territory or show vested entitlements as a precondition to request boundary changes), identifying housing for all incomes as a factor to determine if a proposal which would otherwise be discouraged would promote orderly growth and therefore be appropriate, address inconsistencies with general plans, a new policy statement to determine when extending municipal services to agricultural lands may be appropriate, and eliminating cross-reference to LAFCO's Procedures Guide in favor of directly adding the applicable procedures as an appendix.

"This is really just checking to make sure we're on the right path," said LAFCO executive officer Keene Simonds.

"The county or the Board of Supervisors is the one who should be calling the shots for housing projects," Desmond said. "To me this is a cause looking for a problem."

East Bay Times

New Bay Area crown: Most expensive place in the world to build

High demand, tight labor and tariffs lead to record prices

By [Louis Hansen](#) | lhansen@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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The Bay Area is the most expensive place in the world to build an apartment building, office tower, hospital, warehouse or school.

And it's not even close — the region is 13 percent more costly to develop than second-place New York, according to a new report by UK-based consultant Turner & Townsend.

“Another dubious award for the Bay Area,” said Russell Hancock, CEO of the non-partisan, regional think-tank Joint Venture Silicon Valley.

The report blamed high costs on a combustible mixture of high demand, labor shortages, steel tariffs and rapid economic growth.

Even as the expanding Bay Area economy demands more homes, offices, roads and transit projects, rising costs could threaten development, forcing project delays or changes in size and scope.

The region eclipsed New York for the first time last year, and also outstripped London, Zurich and Hong Kong for the top spot. The average construction cost per square foot in the Bay Area is now \$417, besting New York's average of \$368 per square foot.

Costs for commercial development, including apartments, grew 5 percent in the Bay Area last year, tied with Seattle for the fastest-rising market in North America, according to Turner & Townsend. And it could get worse — the real estate consultant firm expects Bay Area prices to grow 6 percent more this year.

John Robbins, North American managing director at Turner & Townsend, said Bay Area developers have been forced to bring in [labor from outside the region](#) to handle the demand, and also raise prices as tariffs drive up the cost of steel, aluminum and other materials.

“It's good old supply and demand,” Robbins said. “Contractors are stretched.”

The labor needs have pushed wages up for Bay Area construction workers, whose earnings now only trail workers in New York and Zurich. The region is also one of many in the world facing a shortage of skilled labor, according to the report.

Bay Area prices have also been pushed higher by tech giants desire to create more inventive and complex buildings, Robbins said. Facebook last year unveiled its sprawling new campus in Menlo Park designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry. The social media company [spent an estimated \\$1 billion](#) on recent construction in Menlo Park, according to city permits. Two years ago, Apple opened its vast, spaceship headquarters in Cupertino, [estimated to cost \\$5 billion](#).

Google also has ambitious plans in Mountain View and San Jose. “These are not just square boxes anymore,” Robbins said. “They’re going to make some beautiful spaces.”

Although the study focused on commercial construction, Robbins said the labor and materials crunch is felt acutely in the residential home building market as well. He added that major tech companies definitely recognize and want to help address the region’s shortage of affordable housing and reliable transit.

It’s another hurdle for Bay Area policymakers to leap — rising construction costs have made it unprofitable for developers to bring homes for low- and middle-income residents to market.

Josh Roden, president of Brookfield Residential in the Bay Area, said the region’s labor shortage started about a decade ago during the last recession, when construction workers found other jobs and moved to cheaper areas.

During the recent economic boom, residential developers have had to compete for skilled workers with major commercial and municipal projects, driving up prices. “It becomes a feeding frenzy,” Roden said. “Some projects don’t get started.”

According to a study by Joint Venture Silicon Valley, the region is running a housing deficit of more than 100,000 units. More than 80 percent of the new homes permitted in the last four years were priced at the top of the market, affordable only to residents in the top-quarter of all earners.

Hancock said Bay Area developers plan for a long, costly public process to build a project, often complicated by legal and regulatory challenges. Cash-rich companies and individuals are also willing to pay a premium to get projects done, inflating prices. “We have a marketplace for affluence,” he said.

High construction prices means higher costs for building new apartments, often driving up rents in new projects. Government subsidies could help add more affordable housing, Hancock said, but “at the moment, that’s not a conversation we’re having.”

East Bay Times

Richmond picks So-Cal developer for Point Molate development



The main building and former Naval officer's homes, foreground, are seen from this drone view at Winehaven in Richmond, Calif., on Monday, Aug. 14, 2018. Winehaven was the world's largest winery from 1907-1919, and then became a fuel depot for the U.S. Navy. The city will be selling the Point Molate property to SunCal to develop at least 670 units of housing. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

By [Ali Tadayon](#) | atadayon@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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RICHMOND — After narrowing down the list of developers who bid on Richmond's plan to build at least 670 housing units on a 270-acre site in Point Molate with views of San Francisco Bay, city officials have sided with SunCal, the Southern California developer building the Oak Knoll complex in Oakland and the Beachwalk on the Mandalay Coast in Oxnard in Southern California.

Richmond's City Council, on Tuesday, opted to enter into an exclusive agreement with Winehaven LLC — a subsidiary of SunCal — to sell it the Point Molate site for \$45 million, and negotiate the development's specifics over the next six months. All of the council members voted in favor of the agreement except for Eduardo Martinez, who has voiced concern over having a housing development at the site, and Melvin Willis, who was absent.

Under a lawsuit settlement between Richmond, the Indian tribe Guidiville Rancheria of California and Upstream Point Molate, the city must approve a plan by April 2020 to develop a community of at least 670 housing units on 30 percent of the property and keep the rest as open

space. Otherwise, the city must sell the 270 acres to Guidiville Rancheria and Upstream Point Molate for \$300.

The city would split the profits from the land sale with the Guidiville and Upstream, who sued the city after the council denied their plan to build a casino there.

Councilman Jael Myrick said siding with SunCal allows the city more flexibility on what the development will look like. While other developers who bid on the project submitted specific proposals, SunCal representatives at a February council meeting said they want to have a partnership with the city and build what the city's residents ask for.

The lawsuit agreement calls for a minimum of 670 units, and SunCal is planning to build as many as 1,200.

Richmond and SunCal will hash out details of the development over the next six months, including the incorporation of commercial retail and office space, a "community lawn and kayaking center" as well as a long-term plan for the pier, a shoreline park, open space areas and trails, and the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Winehaven Historic District buildings. SunCal, under the agreement, will also look into the feasibility of a hotel at Point Molate.

The agreement calls for a minimum of 67 affordable units at the site, or for the developer to pay required in lieu fees.

After six months, the city and the developer will enter an agreement as to how the land will be used, and the developer will pay Richmond \$45 million for the property.

"The (disposition and development agreement) is really where the action is at, that's the defining document," Myrick said.

Public speakers expressed both concern and support for the negotiating agreement at Tuesday's meeting. Several labor union members said they were happy that the agreement specified that the developer must commit to enter into an agreement with local unions before the work is contracted out.

Richmond resident Tarnel Abbott said the agreement is a "bad deal." She sees it as a giveaway of a prized asset.

"Point Molate is worth more than \$45 million. That's a ludicrous, low-ball amount of money to ask for this beautiful jewel; it's crazy. Why are you letting SunCal make the profit at the expense of Richmond's general fund? This is an equity issue that affects everybody in Richmond," Abbott said.

Other developers who bid on the project included Orton Development, which pitched building somewhere between 670 and 2,200 apartments, mostly in the Winehaven District, in addition to a public waterfront. Point Molate Partners — a joint venture of Cal-Coast Companies and Mar Ventures — laid out a similar housing scenario, but also planned a 150-room hotel and

converting the Winehaven building into a “food hall and brewery similar to Emeryville’s Public Market or the Ferry Building in San Francisco.”

Samuelson Schafer proposed a development with 2,000 residential units, a mixture of apartments, condos, townhouses and houses as well as a retirement community, a public beach and a retail district.

Late last year, the City Council approved a set of requirements for the proposals that limited the area for housing to the historic Winehaven District and some surrounding areas, as well as calling on developers to aim to make two-thirds of the units affordable and cover all associated infrastructure costs. Those requirements were scrapped after developers said they were too stringent and threatened to back out.

A group of people have been critical of the settlement with the casino developers and the plans to build a large-scale housing development at Point Molate. They have voiced concern over the development’s safety, environmental effects and impact on the rest of the city’s housing prices.

Martinez News-Gazette

Planning Commission moves forward Dunivan annexation request, shooting range zones

[Donna Beth Weilenman](#) | [April 28, 2019](#) | [0 Comments](#)



604 Ferry Street in downtown Martinez.

Martinez Planning Commission met Tuesday and unanimously approved an annexation request for 10 acres owned by the Dunivan Family Trust and also unanimously approved a conditional permitted use for an indoor shooting ranges in the Central Commercial zoning district.

The annexation request is for a narrow parcel at 1030 Vaca Creek Road that is bounded on three sides by the city limits, although it's currently in unincorporated Contra Costa County.

The county has zoned it as Agricultural Lands, and it likely would have Alhambra Valley Agricultural District zoning if it's admitted into Martinez, according to a staff report.

The land has a single home and road access, the report said. In addition, receives city water service.

Before the property could be annexed, the Contra Costa Transit Authority must approve the Urban Limit Line adjustment, although the Authority has said the change would comply with its Growth Management Program.

Once the Planning Commission decides whether to recommend the annexation, the City Council will decide whether to approve the Annexation General Plan Amendment, pre-zoning and Urban Limit Line amendment after the public gets a chance to comment during an open hearing.

If that happens, city staff will work with county officials on a tax exchange agreement, then file an annexation application with the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo) which will conduct its own public hearing prior to rendering a decision.

Should the application clear those hurdles, Martinez staff will make the changes to city map.

The other main agenda item was Off Trail/Brandon Varise Flexsquare LLC's request to put a shooting gallery in an enclosed building at 604 Ferry St., creating an experiential sporting goods store, providing an all-weather place to practice and become proficient with firearms.

To accommodate this request, the city would need to consider a zoning text amendment (ZTA) to add the definition for "shooting gallery within an enclosed building" and to allow those ranges as a permitted use in any Central Commercial (CC) District in the city.

Brandon Varise can a short presentation to the Commission and explained his idea for a retail sporting good store for downtown Martinez. Varise owns several properties in downtown Martinez, including 718 and 724 Main Street.

"An indoor range within a large flagship retail store will immediately contribute to the revitalization of downtown Martinez," Varise explained to the Planning Commission. "With an extensive in-store product catalog spanning several categories, including fishing, boating, camping, clothing/footwear, and hunting, it will draw customers from all over the Bay Area to downtown Martinez.

"It will also benefit other downtown businesses by attracting a significant cross-section of the shopping public to the city center. Shopping districts with anchor stores have consistently outperformed those areas without them, and have been proven to attract other retailers to the area. Brick and Mortar retail has been on the decline in the US for several years. Amazon has made it easy to shop without ever leaving the house.

"We believe that by offering an experience that customers are not able to get anywhere else, it will bring customers from surrounding cities to downtown Martinez."

Varise commented the store would employ 20-25 people and hours of operation would be 7 days a week from 10 a.m – 9 p.m., although he was willing to close at an earlier time.

Currently, there are two CC zones in Martinez, one along Arnold Drive and the other in the downtown business area.

According to a staff report, the city allows shooting galleries within an enclosed building by right in Commercial Recreation areas, and outdoor shooting galleries are conditionally-permitted uses in the same zone.

While shooting galleries aren't common in central Contra Costa County, the Martinez Gun Club is an outdoor club on 900 Waterbird Way and another outdoor club, United Sportsman Inc, is in Concord.

There isn't an enclosed shooting gallery nearby, the report said.

Martinez Police Department said it had no objection to the shooting gallery, nor did a building official. However, an application to have an enclosed shooting gallery as a conditional use in the Service Commercial District was denied in 1999, the report said, because of concerns raised about noise and proximity to residential areas.

The report noted several considerations. Among them is general safety, although the Building Code has specifications that apply that would require barriers to make sure bullets wouldn't escape the enclosed space and requirements for the business operation to assure safety of those inside the building.

The operator would need to require that all patrons have licenses for their guns, and noise canceling headphones would be needed by those in the building.

Varise told the panel that "noise concerns related to an indoor range would be mitigated by the implementation of concrete with noise absorbing baffles as well as Dura-Panel products, and would result in an internal building noise level equivalent to 60 db or less which is the average volume inside of an office. The average street noise in a residential neighborhood is 70+ db. There will not be a noise disturbance to pedestrians or other businesses in the area."

Because firing weapons indoors can reduce air quality, a study would be needed to assure the building's ventilation system would be adequate before any permit would be issued, the report said.

Still the indoor shooting gallery would be "within the parameters of acceptable uses of the CC district, the report said.

Varise commented that he had spoken to nearby business owners. Noise was the main concern expressed to him. "People are supportive, no one has come out against it," Varise said. "(The Martinez downtown area) needs a stronger retail presence."

Commission chairperson Sigrid Fallentine noted that "all we are doing is changing the zoning, a lot more has to be done before this comes back to us again. Noise and air, all those concerns will be addressed."

Published May 1st, 2019

MOFD ramps up fire prevention efforts to allay rough fire season ahead

By Nick Marnell



District aide Patrick Carrillo with the new MOFD wood chipper Photo MOFD

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District solidified its commitment to increased fire prevention by upping Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein's position to full time and adding equipment, programs and personnel to fend off a potentially devastating fire season. The district commitment is in addition to the \$6 million state grant for creation of a shaded fuel break in north Orinda and along the Lafayette Ridge.

Rein, who retired as fire chief of the East Bay Regional Park District in 2006, has been with MOFD since 2011 on a part-time basis refining emergency operations plans and preparing emergency operations drills, plus working with local groups like the Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team. He will work his increased hours through December organizing and supporting district fire operations, including the North Orinda Fuel Break program.

"The extra hours are going to allow us to go to the next level," Rein said. "We are getting much more involved with the community right now."

The district will continue its pilot Fuels Mitigation Program, which includes a manager and four part-time personnel whose job is to reduce hazardous fuels in the community. In addition to outreach and education, a major component of the FMP is a community wood chipping program under which MOFD will chip vegetation that has been cut and stacked on the roadway.

Only vegetation can go through the chipper, trees must be less than 6 feet in diameter and the chipped vegetation will not be hauled away but repurposed on the property. The program is intended for neighborhoods, not individuals, and complete program details can be found on the MOFD website.

The board approved the purchase of two utility pickup trucks, one of which will be used in the chipping program and the other for out-of-county deployments by personnel who travel to wildland mutual aid incidents. Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said that through these deployments, district personnel gain invaluable experience on large-scale wildland incidents that is transferable to the local area.

MOFD further beefed up its apparatus fleet with the board-approved purchase of a new Type 6 fire engine, a small vehicle used to transport firefighters to the scene of hard-to-reach wildland fires, like those that could occur in district high fire hazard severity zones.

A major component of any fire prevention plan is the cooperation of district residents. Rein said that everyone needs to comply with the fire code and maintain a defensible space on their property, and observe the district June 15 weed abatement deadline. "We're all in this together and we're all part of the solution," Rein said. "We need the residents to do their part to prepare for a very rough fire season ahead."

MOFD open house May 4 offers exhibits on wildfire preparedness

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District hosts an open house May 4 at Fire Station 45 in Orinda, with the theme of community wildfire preparedness weaving through the exhibits, events and presentations. "It's going to be the most informative open house in years," Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard said. "We have received an enormous response from our sponsors. In all the time I've been here, I have not seen the level of interest and concern that I have seen this year."

Based on property owners' reactions at recent MOFD meetings, wildfire prevention is certainly top-of-mind for district residents, and staff from the Diablo Firesafe Council will explain how mini-grants are available for defending the home against wildfires. Representatives from Firewise USA will explain how neighborhoods can become Firewise communities - empowering neighbors to take action to prevent devastating wildfires. "The Firewise model gives neighborhoods an example of what they can do to protect themselves," Leonard said.

Hands-only CPR training and fire safety training will be offered by district personnel, and there will be fun events for families, too, including hanging out with the firefighters and checking out the fire apparatus. Plenty of entertainment is planned for the kids as well, with appearances by Smokey Bear and Sparky the Fire Dog. The firefighters will cook "firehouse hot dogs" for purchase, with proceeds going to the Muscular Dystrophy Association of the Greater Bay Area.

But make no mistake: community involvement for wildfire prevention is the driving force of this open house. "The recent tragedies show us that we must work collaboratively," Leonard said. "We don't want to see another Napa."

The open house runs from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. May 4 at Fire Station 45, 33 Orinda Way in Orinda Village.

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Governor discusses urgent need for fuel reduction this wildfire season

By Nick Marnell



Gov. Newsom outlines North Orinda Fuel Break program. Photo Steven Danziger

Gov. Gavin Newsom traveled to the Moraga-Orinda Fire District April 23 to outline his major statewide fire prevention plan, encompassing 35 projects he approved for areas in California most vulnerable to a devastating wildfire.

When Newsom took office in January, he asked the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection for a list of state areas in urgent need of fuel reductions and other preventive measures to ward off wildfires. Cal Fire submitted a list of 35 statewide projects, including the North Orinda Fuel Break, a 14-mile shaded fuel break from near the top of Eagle's Nest Trail, down Wildcat Canyon Road to Bear Creek Road and along Lafayette Ridge to Pleasant Hill Road.

"This is one of the larger projects of the 35," Newsom said, speaking at a press conference in Tilden Park, about one mile from the site of the 1991 Oakland Hills fire and adjacent to the western terminus of the North Orinda Fuel Break project, and within MOFD jurisdiction. The 1,700-acre north Orinda project, No. 9 on the Cal Fire list, affects more than 500,000 people in 30 East Bay communities. "You are as vulnerable as Butte County," said Newsom, referring to the 2018 Camp Fire, which killed 85 and destroyed more than 13,000 homes.

The governor said that the 1991 Oakland Hills fire was seared into everyone's memory, and it has presented new standards and expectations. "We've been scattershot, but not as deliberate as we are today," Newsom said. "I signed a declaration of emergency in advance of an emergency."

Newsom acknowledged that transferring the money to the jurisdictions that are spearheading the projects has been a complex process. MOFD, which will partner with various public agencies to complete the north Orinda project, had not received a contract with grant terms from Cal Fire by the date of the press conference. But Cal Fire Director Thom Porter said that the agency is committed to having state workers and contractors on the job in north Orinda in early May. "We'll also see some National Guard that we've pulled off the border to do some real work," Newsom said, a dig at President Donald Trump.

Porter also said that the MOFD North Orinda Fuel Break grant has been increased to \$6 million. Once the contracts between Cal Fire and MOFD have been finalized, the grant will go to the fire district board for acceptance.

Newsom echoed what MOFD officials have been stressing now more than ever. "We can't do it alone," the governor said. "We need folks to work on defensible space. Nothing is more important than localism."

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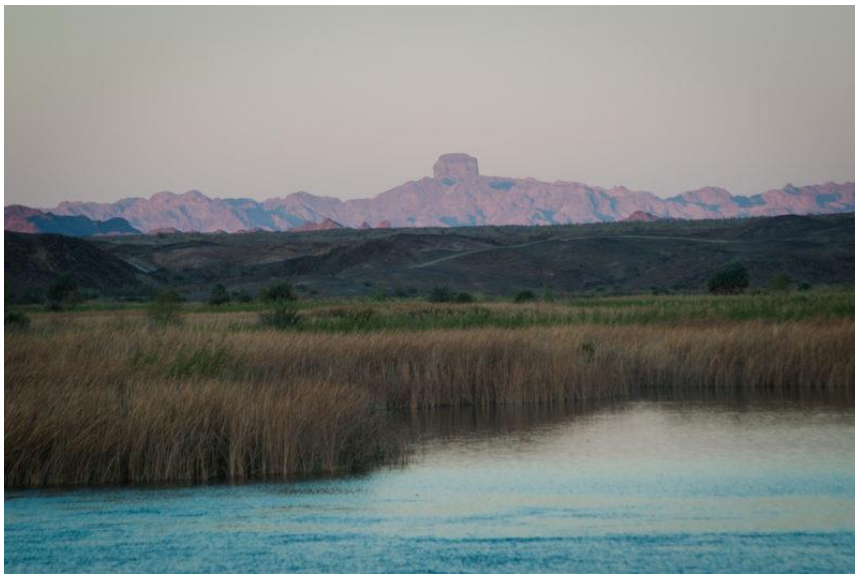
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Voice of San Diego

A Little-Known Company Is Quietly Making Massive Water Deals

In the past several years, Los Angeles-based Renewable Resources Group has helped sell 33,000 acres of land to California's most powerful water agency, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Documents obtained by VOSD raise fresh questions about those deals. Now, Renewable may be working on another deal that could rearrange the distribution of water in California forever.



The Imperial Valley has more rights to water from the Colorado River than entire states. Here, at the Imperial Dam, it's sent to the valley. Now, investors may want to make money by sending the water elsewhere. / Photo by Andrew Cullen

In 2011, Harvard University and a small private company began buying up rights to the West's most important water source: the Colorado River.

Within a year, they owned nearly 13,000 acres near the small Riverside County farming community of Blythe.

Farmers in Blythe and the surrounding Palo Verde Valley are supposed to keep getting water even after nearly everyone else in the Southwestern United States runs dry. That's thanks to [a complex and bizarre system of water rights](#) that California, six other states and Mexico use to share the Colorado.

Harvard's partner in the deal was Los Angeles-based Renewable Resources Group, a quiet but increasingly important developer of water, energy and farming projects. Renewable has found ways to speculate on and make lots of money from land deals that involve water.

In the past several years, Renewable has helped sell 33,000 acres of land to California's most powerful water agency, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

In 2015, Metropolitan bought the land around Blythe and the water that comes with it for \$255 million. Tax filings suggest that was twice what Harvard and Renewable had paid for the land just a few years earlier.

Within months, Renewable was wrapping up another deal with Metropolitan. This time the company was working on behalf of a Swiss insurance company.

By spring 2016, Metropolitan had agreed to pay \$175 million for 20,000 acres of farmland south of Sacramento. Again, Metropolitan paid a premium for the land – and again, Renewable was reaping the rewards. A 5-year-old appraisal showed the land was worth about half what Metropolitan paid.

Both deals set off alarm bells across the state, largely because of Metropolitan's involvement. Fear and hate of the Los Angeles-based water district runs deep in state water politics.

Metropolitan, which delivers water used by 19 million Southern Californians, defends both recent deals as necessary to help secure water supplies for the state's most populous areas.

But tax filings, a previously confidential real estate appraisal and memos from closed-door Metropolitan board meetings raise fresh questions about both deals. They suggest Metropolitan may have overpaid by millions of dollars and, in turn, unnecessarily increased the cost of water for customers across the region, including in San Diego.

Renewable's role in both deals also largely escaped notice.

Now, Renewable may be working on another deal that could rearrange the distribution of water in California forever.

Operating under two different names, the company now controls thousands of acres of land in another place with special ties to the Colorado: the Imperial Valley.

Remarkably, farmers there can use more of the Colorado than anyone else. All told, the Imperial Valley, with less than 200,000 people, has rights to as much Colorado River water as Arizona and Nevada combined.

With very little fanfare, Renewable is now one of the largest private landowners in the Imperial Valley. For now, the company says it wants the land for farming, but its recent history suggests it eventually hopes to make money from the valley's water rights.

Cole and Ari

Cole Frates met Ari Swiller [playing basketball](#) in Los Angeles around 1999. Both men were just barely 30-somethings but with impressive resumes.

Swiller had worked on both of Bill Clinton's presidential campaigns and on Capitol Hill. At that time, Swiller was out West handling politics and fundraising for billionaire investor Ron Burkle, [a Clinton associate](#).

Frates was a developer in the obscure but lucrative international water industry.

In 1999, [Enron bought](#) Frates' company, [Samda](#), which did water projects in the United States, Argentina, Cyprus and Saudi Arabia. After about a month, [he transferred](#) to Enron's water-related spinoff, Azurix.

Frates spent about a year and a half there before he left.

Within a few years, Frates and Swiller decided to go into business together. They called their new company Renewable Resources Group.

Frates and Swiller declined to be interviewed for this story. Their personal history is based on depositions the men later gave in a lawsuit and brief resumes they submitted while working with public agencies.

They've worked together under many names across California. ReNuable, ReNu, Homer LLC and Western Development and Storage are just a few.

Even for those who do business with them, their various company names can be confusing. Dan Bartel is the assistant general manager of a Bakersfield water agency that signed a deal with Homer.

"Homer aka Renu aka ????" he wrote in an email to Voice of San Diego when asked about his agency's relationship with Renewable.

In 2011, Frates' name began appearing on deeds to buy land in Riverside's Palo Verde Valley.

On paper, Frates was working with a company known as Verbena. The company was buying land from the investment arm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is a major landowner across the West.

Few people realized Verbena had a big-name silent partner. Harvard's investment arm was the majority owner of Verbena, [according to nonprofit tax filings the university made](#).

Between 2011 and 2012, Verbena became one of the largest landowners in the Palo Verde Valley.

While farming there is profitable, the company had its eye on another prize: the water.

Frates and Swiller began shopping around an audacious plan.

The Plan

Water had been leaving the Palo Verde Valley since 2005, after the Palo Verde Irrigation District and Metropolitan came up with a way to idle farmland in the valley. The practice, known as fallowing, is controversial. Farmers get paid to stop irrigating their fields. Then unused water is sent somewhere else that needs it, Southern California cities in this case.

The program depended on cooperation from farmers. For the most part, that wasn't a problem – [Metropolitan paid them millions](#). But Metropolitan knew there was a more dependable, easier and cheaper way to get the water: [Just buy the land](#).

It knew this because in 2001 it paid \$41 million to buy 16,000 acres of Palo Verde land from San Diego Gas & Electric. Metropolitan then leased the land to farmers, with one big catch: They *had* to fallow their fields whenever Metropolitan asked, since they were now on its land.

Since Metropolitan generally has rights to whatever Colorado River water Palo Verde doesn't use, a bucket of water unused in Palo Verde is a bucket of water that can be used by Metropolitan.

Metropolitan had even tried to buy the land that Renewable eventually bought from the Mormon church.

Renewable entered the mix with a wildly different idea. With nearly 13,000 acres in hand, Frates and Swiller began trying to create their own sort of fallowing program. That's [according to a confidential memo](#) that Metropolitan staff later prepared, obtained by Voice of San Diego through a public records request.

Renewable tried several times to transfer water from its land near Blythe to the Central Valley, a giant swath of farmland over 300 miles away.

To be clear, the Central Valley doesn't touch the Colorado River – at all – but farmers everywhere need water. The Central Valley's two main water sources are rivers running down from the Sierra Nevada mountains and water pumped up from underground aquifers. Thanks to droughts, stricter environmental regulations and the farmers' own overzealous pumping, both sources are now less reliable and more expensive.

Renewable saw a business opportunity. What if these farmers could buy water from the Colorado?

According to Metropolitan, Renewable offered to sell Palo Verde water to several water agencies in the Central Valley, including the Fresno-based Westlands Water District.

If Metropolitan is the state's most powerful water agency, Westlands is a close runner-up. Westlands is probably the only Central Valley agency with a realistic chance of pulling off such a spectacularly complicated deal.

Renewable would fallow its Palo Verde land. That's where the problems began. Normally, according to the Colorado River rights system, that water would then automatically become Metropolitan's for free.

Renewable still wanted Metropolitan to take the water, but with a twist. Metropolitan would agree to give up water it gets from the Sierra and allow that water to stay in the Central Valley.

Metropolitan had to agree to all of this, since it's the only major water agency with physical and legal access to water from both the Colorado River and the Sierra.

At first this may sound like robbing Peter to pay Paul, but Central Valley farmers would suddenly have more water than they had before, while Metropolitan wouldn't have any less. What would be in it for Renewable and Harvard? Since Colorado River water is cheaper than Sierra water, Renewable could sell the water in the Central Valley at a markup.

Renewable looked at the West's arcane system of water rights, and saw a chance to make money from its absurdity.

But there was a problem with the plan.

Metropolitan said no.

Plan B

After Metropolitan passed on Renewable's water trading idea, Renewable and Harvard offered to sell off all the Palo Verde land.

Riverside County property tax records indicate Renewable and Harvard likely paid the Mormon church between \$10,000 and \$11,000 an acre for most of the land. The Mormon church's investment arm, Harvard and Renewable declined to comment on the terms of the deal.

Four years later, Metropolitan bought the land for \$20,000 an acre.

Metropolitan justified the purchase, which was unanimously approved by its board, by citing other people's interest in some sort of Palo Verde deal, including from Westlands and also [Saudi interest](#) in buying land that comes with water rights.

Metropolitan also figured that paying farmers to fallow land would end up costing [\\$15,000 to \\$21,000 an acre](#) over the next few decades. If Harvard and Renewable hadn't sold the land, they could have still collected payments from Metropolitan for fallowing the land. So Metropolitan bet that even by paying a premium for the land at the time, it would save money in the future.

"We expect to probably be in Palo Verde Valley for generations to come," said Metropolitan's general manager, Jeffrey Kightlinger.

Soon after the Palo Verde deal closed, Renewable and Metropolitan were back negotiating over another major chunk of important California real estate.

The Delta Islands



Corn fields on Bacon Island, one of the inland islands the Metropolitan Water District bought for \$175 million. / Photo by Robert Durell, courtesy of the Metropolitan Water District

In January 2011, tragedy struck a Renewable site. An experienced crop duster pilot, Steve Allen, was flying over Webb Tract, one of the strange inland islands formed amid the convergence of rivers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Since the mid-1980s, investors have wanted to take Webb Tract and another nearby island known as Bacon Island and turn them into reservoirs. Basically that involves flooding the islands and using them to store water.

This idea kept running into obstacles.

In 2007, the islands' owners, an American subsidiary of Switzerland-based Zurich Insurance Group, [turned to Frates for help](#).

Zurich hired Renewable-affiliated Western Development and Storage to look at new ways to make money from the land. Their agreement made clear the more money Zurich made on any deal, [the more Renewable would make](#).

One idea was to turn the land into a wind farm. So, they hired another company to put up a 197-foot tower to measure wind currents.

The tower didn't have any warning signs on it, [making it nearly invisible for pilots](#). The tower broke the wing off Allen's plane.

It crashed, and he died.

The tragedy led to changes in state law. Now [such towers must be marked](#).

The crash also prompted [a lawsuit against Renewable and others by Allen's family](#). They eventually settled for \$6.7 million.

In the course of the lawsuit, Renewable turned over documents and made comments that shed light on the company's inner workings and, more specifically, on how much it thought the land in the delta was worth.

One such document has been long sought by critics of Metropolitan's deal in the delta: [an appraisal of the land](#).

Zurich asked real estate experts at San Diego-based Cushman & Wakefield to appraise the delta land, some 20,000 acres in all.

In December 2010, Cushman & Wakefield said the land was worth \$93 million.

If the reservoir project ever happened, it could be worth \$750 million, according to the appraisal. That number was hard to believe, even to people who stood to make money from the project.

In 2014, Roger Dreyer, a Sacramento lawyer who represented the Allen family, deposed [Swiller, Frates](#) and his sister, [Lloys Frates](#), who also worked at the company.

Dreyer asked Swiller whether the land could really ever be worth \$750 million.

"It's higher than what I think, but I wouldn't tell Delta Wetlands that," Swiller said, referring to Zurich's subsidiary, Delta Wetlands Properties.

Zurich also had an attorney in the room.

“OK,” Dreyer said. “Well, I think you just did.”

“Sorry,” Swiller said.

Nevertheless, Renewable tried to sell the project to Metropolitan for hundreds of millions of dollars, Kightlinger said. Metropolitan never had much interest in the island-flooding idea, though.

Renewable also explored other ways to make money off the land for Zurich.

With [the help of Doug Boxer](#) – former Sen. Barbara Boxer’s son – they looked at whether they could capture carbon dioxide on the islands.

They, of course, looked at wind energy, but decided to stop work on that after Allen’s death.

“The enormous tragedy had a chilling effect on both the morale inside of my shop, and I’m sure – and just the whole thing around it was a terrible thing,” [Frates told Dreyer](#) in the deposition. “And so I – it was – I mean, it’s just something that I don’t think anybody wanted to do anymore.”

But, it turns out, Gov. Jerry Brown’s plan to build a pair of tunnels to move water from Northern California to Southern California ran through part of two islands Zurich owned.

Metropolitan was doing everything it could to make sure those tunnels were built.

Now, Metropolitan was interested in Zurich’s land.

When Metropolitan paid \$175 million to buy four delta islands and part of a fifth island in spring 2016, Central Californians freaked out. People living in and around the delta said Metropolitan was working on a “water grab.” The Sacramento Bee said the agency had just “[parachuted into enemy territory](#).”

Metropolitan also caught flak from its southern flank.

Officials at the San Diego County Water Authority asked to see an appraisal of the land in 2016. For years, San Diego water officials have been fighting with Metropolitan and accusing it of wantonly spending money. Metropolitan said it didn’t have one.

About a year later, Kightlinger said publicly he’d seen a 4-year-old appraisal of the land. When San Diego officials filed a public records request to get a copy of that document, [Metropolitan again said it didn’t have one](#).

When Voice of San Diego sent Metropolitan the appraisal that Renewable turned over in the plane crash case, Kightlinger said he wasn’t sure if that was the one he’d seen.

Still, he defended the deal. Metropolitan had [examined the sales price of other delta land](#), though it’s not clear if that land was truly comparable to the islands.

It’s also apparently rare for large chunks of land in the delta to become available.

“There was nothing quite like it in the delta,” Kightlinger said.

Plus, he said, buying the land spared the state what could have been a lengthy dispute with Zurich when the state or Metropolitan went to build the tunnels.

But now the tunnel project is on hold. Despite a big push by Metropolitan and Brown last year, Gov. Gavin Newsom is reconfiguring the project, a delay that could last who knows how long.

Metropolitan recently agreed to sell part of one of the islands to the state. Between the money it borrowed to buy the land and the property taxes it now pays, Metropolitan is losing about \$7 million a year.

On to Imperial

Over the past several years, two companies – Alphabet Farms and Imperial Farming – have been buying up farmland in the Imperial Valley.

Renewable controls both.

Collectively, the companies own about 16,000 acres of land in the valley, according to Imperial County property records.

Alphabet Farms alone is [the second-largest property taxpayer in the county](#). As of June 2018, the company owned land with an assessed value of about \$180 million. (The name Alphabet Farms comes from Renewable’s way of naming the various ranches it owns – Ranch A, Ranch B, Ranch C and so on.)

The Imperial Valley covers a half-million acres of Imperial County and has a right to 2.6 million acre feet of Colorado River water. That’s enough water for nearly 8 million Southern California homes.

Speculators have been going after Imperial’s water for years. If enough farmers followed their land, there’d be a lot of water that could be sold elsewhere in the state.

In the 1990s, billionaire investors known as the Bass Brothers [bought up 40,000 acres in the valley](#). They apparently thought they could fallow land and sell the unused water to the San Diego County Water Authority.

Except water rights in Imperial don’t work quite like they do in Palo Verde and some other irrigation districts in the West. The Imperial Irrigation District holds the valley’s rights in trust, meaning the water can’t be moved anywhere outside of the district without its approval. That makes it the most powerful political player in the county.

That doesn’t mean arm-twisting can’t work, though. After the Bass Brothers sparked San Diego’s interest, [water officials here worked for years](#) to strike a deal to get water out of Imperial. [San Diego eventually agreed to pay the Imperial Irrigation District](#). For years, IID has taken that money and paid its farmers to use less water, which frees up water now used in San Diego.

Renewable’s intentions are far from clear.

“In the Imperial Valley farming community, it’s no secret that we are Alphabet Farms and Imperial Farming,” Renewable spokesman Tom Eisenhauer said in an email. “Working with a number of local growers, we’ve produced crops spanning the range of what Imperial Valley agriculture offers, from alfalfa and Bermuda, to lettuce and onions, to lemons and dates.”

It's true that Renewable is farming in Imperial and elsewhere in the state. It owns both Sun World, a major grape grower, and Woodspur Farms, the country's largest grower of organic dates.

Yet Frates and Swiller's history of water-related deals suggest they may be trying to do something with the land beyond using it for farming. Renewable's chief operating officer, Nicole Neeman Brady, is now a member of the [Colorado River Board of California](#), an eight-member board that represents the state in discussions and negotiations about management of the river. Eisenhower said she does that in her personal capacity.

Almost everyone in the West is betting that when push comes to shove, the key to making sure cities have enough water is to pay farmers to fallow their land or farm with less water. There is also money to be made selling water from one farm to another.

A snowy winter recently spared the Colorado River and the millions of people who depend on it a first-ever water shortage. But climate change is going to make the already overused river increasingly undependable. So, farmers and other companies with water rights could soon be making a lot of money.

That's what Kightlinger assumes Renewable is up to in Imperial, some sort of deal like the one it tried to pull off in the Central Valley with Palo Verde water.

"I think they are still just trying that same game," Kightlinger said.

A Westlands spokeswoman said she was "not aware of any ongoing discussions." Renewable didn't comment on its future plans.

If the game doesn't go Renewable's way in Imperial, Metropolitan doesn't seem interested in buying the company's land this time.

Renewable also may not own enough of the valley yet to make a huge difference even if it could fallow its land and sell off the water. Kightlinger said someone would need 50,000 acres or more to free up enough water to make a deal worth it for Metropolitan. It's possible Renewable may have options on more land in Imperial, because such options don't have to be disclosed the way land ownership is.

So far, farmers in Imperial do not seem to be panicking about the company in their midst.

Part of that, though, may be because they don't realize how much Renewable has already done.

Reno Gazette Journal

Wildfire burn zones depleting snowpack across West, which fuels more fires and snow loss, research shows

[Benjamin Spillman](#), Reno Gazette Journal Published 6:00 a.m. PT May 8, 2019 | Updated 12:35 p.m. PT **May 8, 2019**

Story Highlights

- Researchers studying the relationship between wildfire and snowmelt made 'astonishing' findings
- They found snow in burn zones across 11 western states melts five days earlier than in unburned spots
- The increased melt rate due to fire is in addition to faster melt due to climate change
- The phenomenon is a 'vicious cycle' that's expected to intensify as the climate warms

Wildfires that increasingly plague the American West are contributing more than previously known to the deterioration of the region's snowpack, according to newly published research.

The effect of wildfires on snowmelt is more widespread and longer lasting than people thought and has ramifications across the region, where cities such as Las Vegas, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Reno and Salt Lake rely heavily on melting snow to replenish water supplies.

What's more, human-caused global warming is feeding the spread of fires, which contributes more to the deterioration of snow, thus extending and intensifying the fire season. The resulting burn areas then contribute to the snow melting faster, perpetuating the cycle.

"I'm astonished," Kelly Gleason, an assistant professor of ecohydrology at Portland State University, said of the findings.

Gleason was the lead author on a paper that disclosed the findings in the journal *Nature Communications*. Joseph McConnell, a hydrology professor at Desert Research Institute in Reno, was among the co-authors. Other co-authors included Monica Arienzo and Nathan Chellman from DRI and Wendy Calvin from University of Nevada, Reno.

"This fire effect on snowmelt is much more widespread and persistent than we originally thought," said Gleason. "Forest fires could have a big impact on the timing and availability of our water resources and trigger, potentially, more, bigger, hotter fires in the future."

Satellite imagery reveals impact

The research looked not only at how wildfires contribute to the depletion of snowpack, it looked at how widespread the phenomenon is across 11 Western states.

Researchers used satellite data to study the rate of snowmelt in burn zones left behind by about 850 fires since 2000.

The data showed snow melted, on average, five days sooner within burn zones than in places that hadn't burned. The shift was in addition to other factors, such as human-caused climate change, that also contribute to an earlier melt.

The satellite data also showed the phenomenon was widespread across 11 states, meaning it's likely happening just about anywhere there are forest fires and snow.



Kelly Gleason, an assistant professor of environmental science at Portland State University, on skis collecting snow samples in the Hogback Basin of Wyoming in 2017. Gleason's work showed the link between wildfires and snowmelt was more widespread and persistent than previously known. (Photo: Contributed photo)

“That was the first time we observed this phenomenon at that scale,” Gleason said. “We were shocked. We did not expect it to be observable from space.”

The observation that snow was melting more quickly in burned areas was enough to suggest to researchers the connection between wildfire and snowmelt was widespread. But it wasn't enough to conclusively blame fires for earlier melt.

To identify the link, they hiked into burn areas in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah to collect snow samples they sent to DRI's Ultra-Trace Ice Core Analytical Laboratory in Reno.

The lab is one of the few places on the planet with the equipment and expertise to measure how dust and other contaminants contribute to snowmelt.

It's about 'albedo'

The results showed the main contributors to earlier snowmelt in burn areas was the loss of tree canopy which exposed the snow to more sun and the increased presence of black carbon and other debris that made the snow absorb more heat instead of reflecting it back to the sky.

The tree loss effect was expected. The widespread persistence of the debris effect was more surprising.

“Snow is typically very reflective, which is why it appears white, but just a small change in the albedo or reflectivity of the snow surface can have a profound impact on the amount of solar energy absorbed by the snowpack,” McConnell said. “This solar energy is a key factor driving snowmelt.”

Although a difference of five days seems minor, spread across hundreds of burn areas across the West, it's significant, Gleason said.

Snowpack acts as a reservoir for about 50 to 70 percent of the water across the Intermountain West. In some areas, depending on seasonal variation, it can be even greater.

During this past winter, the Central Sierra Snow Laboratory in Truckee, Calif., showed that more than 80 percent of precipitation came in the form of snow.

Ecological impact

The high reliance on snow as an actor in the ecosystems of the West means changes in the timing of the melt can make a big difference for plants, animals and people.

“So many ecosystem processes cue off that timing,” Gleason said.

Examples include plants and trees that “wake up” from winter to conduct photosynthesis to fuel their life cycle, salmon that sense when to swim upstream to spawn and reservoir managers who want to operate storage basins to reduce flooding while capturing the maximum amount of water possible to help communities survive hot, dry summers.

Abrupt changes in timing of snowmelt can create chaos, Gleason said, and disrupt those processes.

“By the time the users need it, be it forests, fish or people, it may no longer be there,” she said.

The effect is expected to become more profound in the future as the West copes with global warming, which is the result of fossil fuel burning releasing carbon into the atmosphere that traps and holds heat, like a greenhouse.

Global warming is already contributing to the spread and intensification of fires and increasing the rate of snowmelt.

And the increased rate of snowmelt is contributing to longer periods of dry fuels which extends the fire season which creates more burn zones that speed snow melt.

The research shows an annual 9 percent growth in Western forests burned since 1984 and a 372 to 443 percent increase in solar energy absorbed by snowpack on charred forest over 20 years.

In 2018, burn zones affected the rate of snowmelt in as much as 11 percent of western forests, according to the research.

The effect is particularly potent in the headwater regions of the Rocky Mountains where there is an anticipated 300 to 700 percent increase in burned area for every 1-degree Celsius increase in global average temperature.

“There is this sort of vicious cycle occurring between fire and snowmelt,” Gleason said. “We are already at a threshold in terms of fires getting bigger, hotter and longer lasting on the landscape.”

Benjamin Spillman covers the outdoors and environment in Northern Nevada, from backcountry skiing in the Sierra to the latest from Lake Tahoe's ecosystem. [Support his work by subscribing to RGJ.com right here.](#)

East Bay Times

In Bay Area housing shortage, fees can hinder projects big and small

A small San Jose renovation brings big headaches

By [Louis Hansen](#) | lhansen@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: May 8, 2019 at 6:00 am | UPDATED: **May 9, 2019** at 4:44 am

Property manager and new developer Jeff Zell wanted to convert a rec room into two studios in a San Jose apartment building he owns.

But a project he thought would take a few months and \$75,000 has turned into a two-year, nearly \$200,000 odyssey of frustration, fees and false starts. City charges almost killed the project, Zell said.

The city initially assessed Zell's renovation a mandatory park fee of \$48,800 — revenue designed to support public recreation spaces in San Jose. Zell balked. For that kind of money, he could buy his two tenants season tickets to the 49ers and Warriors, with money left over for a pair of annual passes to the National Parks.

Zell hasn't raised a wall or driven a nail, yet. "It just never ends," he said. He's losing \$100 in potential rent every day the project is delayed. "I'm super frustrated."

Amid a state-wide housing shortage, developers say they feel increasingly burdened by unpredictable government service and impact fees that are almost three times higher than the national average. They say it's an additional drag on residential development in a region already battling [the highest construction costs in the world](#).

Fees are a long-time bugaboo and budget-buster for developers. But towns and cities feel the fiscal pinch of Proposition 13, which limits property tax revenues from long-time property owners. So many municipalities raise service and impact fees to make up for those budget shortfalls to pay for parks, schools, roads and other city priorities. The charges also reimburse governments for staff time spent on projects.

Fees also provide an added bonus for cities resisting growth — high add-on costs can curb development and sink projects, especially for low- and moderate-income housing, developers say.

Pro-housing bills in Sacramento this year would trim fees, and at least one includes waivers to encourage construction of more accessory dwelling units. The bills also would insist municipalities become more transparent and regularly file fee schedules with the state.

Service and impact fees in California in 2015 were nearly triple the national average, according to a study by the Turner Center for Innovative Housing at UC Berkeley. The costs add between 6 and 18 percent to the median price of a new home, according to a sample of seven cities by Berkeley researchers.

For example, Oakland charged \$34,500 per unit for new apartments in a large development, while Fremont assessed \$75,100 for each new rental, according to the study. For new construction in a 20-home subdivision, the center estimated fees of \$62,100 per unit in Oakland and \$156,600 in Fremont.

Cities and counties maintain that the fees are needed to pay for staff time spent reviewing and inspecting projects, as well as for improvements to roads, schools and water systems for a growing population.

David Garcia, policy director at the Turner Center, said the municipal charges were one of several factors driving up construction costs, along with high costs for land, materials and labor. “It’s a complex issue,” he said. “It’s not as simple as saying, ‘We should cap fees.’”

Fees can fall especially hard on homeowners looking to build a backyard unit, he said. Often, cities charge the same rate for an accessory dwelling unit (or ADU) as a single family home, driving up costs for the granny flats and killing the project ambitions of many homeowners.

State lawmakers have ordered a review of local charges, with a report expected from the Department of Housing and Community Development in June.

Assemblyman Tim Grayson, D-Concord, authored a new bill that would require cities and counties to report fees to the state and create a database for lawmakers and developers to get a better handle on costs.

Grayson said he expects the data to give state and local decision makers a clearer picture of how to address rising costs. The goal is to bring clarity and certainty for developers, he said, and “get those housing units off paper and on to land.”

Builders say more transparency in fees would lead to fewer surprises and a smoother, faster timeline for projects.

Developers pass costs directly on to new buyers, housing experts and developers say. The inflated prices also drive up values and sale prices for surrounding homes. One East Bay builder budgeted \$150,000 for inspection fees on a 36-unit development, only to see actual costs reach \$500,000.

Jim Ghielmetti, CEO of Signature Homes in Pleasanton, said the issues have been accumulating for years. “Fees are only part of the housing problem we have,” he said.

On recent projects, Signature Homes paid about \$500,000 to the City of Oakley for seven homes and \$264,000 to Livermore for three homes, company records show. “We have to pass them along,” he said. If not, he added, “we’d all be broke.”

In San Jose, Mayor Sam Liccardo has pledged to add 25,000 homes and apartments to the city by 2022. But in March, the city revealed that it had issued about 3,000 permits for new units in 2018, far short of city leaders’ goal to approve 5,000 annually.

Liccardo said the city will be looking to reduce fees for large, dense downtown residential buildings. He expects the city to consider action in June. He also wants city fees to be more transparent, giving developers a better handle on costs before investing heavily in a project.

Liccardo said in an interview the city has to seriously look at reducing fees.

But any cut in fees would be too late to help Zell. He bought the 37-unit apartment complex on Richfield Drive three years ago and looked to upgrade the property. The two-story, square building, with a leafy courtyard and pool, is two miles from the Apple campus. Tech employees rent most of the one-bedroom units.

San Jose’s fee schedule has a base charge of about \$10,000 for staff time and various review costs, a city planner said.

The city initially told Zell park fees would cost \$24,400 per unit, a total of \$48,800 to support public spaces in the city.

“Screw the city,” he thought. He simmered and sat on the project for six months.

He went back to city planners, and they discovered the fees should actually be about \$38,000, still too rich for Zell’s budget. “I’d rather put the money in the property than give it to the city,” he said.

The two sides reached a compromise. Zell agreed to build an outdoor dining space — two barbecue pits, three picnic tables and some trash cans — in the courtyard. The city dropped the fees to \$19,000.

Zell hopes to start construction next month.

East Bay Times

City kicks in extra money to expand planned affordable housing complex in Concord

A new project would house veterans, seniors



A proposed affordable housing project in Concord on Galindo St. would house veterans, seniors, families and people with disabilities. Plans call for 39 one-bedroom units, 19 two-bedroom units and four three-bedroom apartments in the five-story complex. (Image courtesy of City of Concord)

By [Annie Sciacca](#) | asciaccia@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
PUBLISHED: May 10, 2019 at 2:52 pm | UPDATED: **May 13, 2019** at 3:44 am

A planned affordable housing project in Concord will add a dozen more units for low-income and formerly homeless residents, thanks to a \$2.3 million infusion the Concord City Council allocated this week.

The council [previously approved](#) spending \$5.5 million to help Berkeley-based nonprofit Resources for Community Development build a five-story, 44-unit affordable-housing complex on Galindo Street just south of downtown. Since then, the developer has come up with a plan to acquire an adjacent property that will allow it to expand the project to 62 units.

The five-story complex at 1313-1321 Galindo St. would house veterans, seniors, families and people with disabilities in 39 one-bedroom units, 19 two-bedroom units and four three-bedroom units.

The project is estimated to cost a total of about \$41.2 million, to be financed through a combination of private loans, tax credit equities and other government sources. Resources for Community Development still needs to secure other funding sources, project manager Adam Levine said, but Concord's contribution will help make it more competitive in getting that money.

If the project is approved by the design review and planning commissions and all the property is acquired by the end of this year, construction could start in early 2021 and end by the beginning of 2022.

The housing will be available for people with income ranging from 30 to 60 percent of the area median income. One-bedroom apartments would range between \$654 and \$1,308, depending on tenants' income, and three-bedroom units between \$906 and \$1,812. If the nonprofit secures money for rental subsidies, which it's trying to do, Levine said the rent could drop dramatically.

In addition to low rent, the project will provide financial literacy education and job readiness workshops to tenants and partner with the Veterans Administration to help vets, Klein said.

The project is part of an effort to fulfill the city's housing plan, whose goal is to provide 1,200 units for extremely low, very low and low-income tenants by 2022.

At their meeting Tuesday, council members praised the project for helping the city approach that goal.

Alicia Klein, associate director of housing development for Resources in Community Development, told council members the organization works hard to keep project costs low, which is difficult in the pricey Bay Area.

The nonprofit has four other housing properties in Concord and more throughout the Bay Area.

Published May 15th, 2019

MOFD makes history with all-female engine company

By Nick Marnell



From Left: Katy Himsl, Julie Murphy and Janet Brandi-Routt Photo Andy Scheck

For the first time in the 22-year history of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, an all-female crew was assigned to a shift, with acting Capt. Janet Brandi-Routt partnering with acting engineer Julie Murphy and firefighter-paramedic Katy Himsl. The landmark engine company worked out of Fire Station 42 in Moraga on May 8.

"I'm actually surprised it's taken this long for it to happen," said Brandi-Routt, a 21-year district veteran. According to Brandi-Routt, having the required job classifications fall in such perfect alignment was the reason that the all-female crew finally came together. She and Murphy are regularly assigned to Station 42, and when Himsl pulled the overtime shift to fill a crew vacancy, district history was made.

MOFD has been ahead of the curve in the employment of female firefighters for many years, and earlier this decade, prior to a retirement and a firefighter moving to a district nearer her home, nearly 10 percent of the district suppression roster included women. Today, three of the 48 district fire suppression personnel are women, still above the national average of 4 percent.

"It's good for the community," Himsl said. "People know that Julie and I grew up here, and they like seeing us on the job." Murphy added that it is empowering for young girls to know that they have role models in a traditionally male occupation.

"Moraga-Orinda has always been forward thinking and has always recognized equal opportunity," said Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. "This (landmark event) was especially significant considering the small size of the district."

Jerry Lee, the battalion chief on duty that day, reflected his pride in the close-knit ties among all district personnel. "Member diversity has never been a problem here," Lee said. "This milestone is just another example of great things going on in our organization."

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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East Bay Times

Valley Water's farm subsidy to remain, for now

The district will put off changes to a subsidy for farm water for two years while it looks for other money to keep funding it



A worker clears weeds along a row of romaine lettuce at B&T Farms in Gilroy, Calif., on Tuesday, April 9, 2019. (Randy Vazquez/Bay Area News Group)

By [Thy Vo](#) | tvo@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: May 14, 2019 at 4:00 pm | UPDATED: **May 15, 2019** at 4:22 am

SAN JOSE — Like everyone else in Santa Clara Valley who uses wells, farmers will see their groundwater production charges go up 6.8 percent this year. But unlike the others, they'll continue to receive substantial subsidies.

In approving the increased charges for well users, the Santa Clara Valley Water District board left intact for at least two years the current structure that allows farmers to pay only 6 percent of the amount residents and businesses pay. The water district absorbs the rest of the cost for farmers, mostly through property tax revenue.

Farmers have received subsidized water for decades as part of the district's effort to reduce their financial pressures and thus motivate them to continue growing crops instead of selling their land for development.

But if the water district can't find outside funding to sustain the subsidy, such as through government grants or private donations, the board has decided it will eliminate the subsidy altogether.

District staff last month asked the board to consider approving [a 19.2 percent water production cost increase](#) to farmers, from \$27.02 to \$32.23 per acre foot, but most board directors balked and farmers complained.

And at its meeting Tuesday, the board approved a 6.8 percent increase in groundwater charges to everyone in south county. As a result, residents and businesses will see their bills go up from \$450 to \$481 per acre foot and farmers will pay \$1.84 more per acre foot.

The district levies the charges to recoup its cost of recharging water pumped out of the ground; those expenses include debt and new infrastructure projects such as the seismic retrofitting of the Anderson Dam.

The cost of subsidizing farm water, referred to as "open space credit," is expected to grow over the next decade from \$8.1 million this coming fiscal year to \$22 million in 10 years.

District officials say [paying for that subsidy is unsustainable](#) long-term. The district has talked about reducing the subsidy several times over the last decade.

"We can't tap into other funds the district might have to offset this," board director Barbara Keegan said.

Christopher Hoem, a representative from county Supervisor Mike Wasserman's office, said he's worried about the board's apparent willingness to eliminate the subsidy if it can't find other money.

"I'm a little concerned that the decision is made right now, that in two years, (the subsidy) would by default go away," Hoem said. "I would hope there would be more discussion about that before that decision is made."

Director Linda LeZotte responded that now is the time for people who support the subsidy to step up and help find a permanent solution.

"We have a lot of people telling us what they hope will happen and we hope they will join us in finding a solution," LeZotte said.

Los Angeles Times

California could bring radical change to single-family-home neighborhoods

By Liam Dillon

Los Angeles Times, May 15, 2019

If you live in a single-family home in California, it's likely everyone else in your neighborhood does too.

That could change under a state measure that would require California cities and counties to permit duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes on much of the residential land now zoned for only one house. The proposal was recently added to Senate Bill 50, legislation by Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, that also would allow midrise apartment construction near mass transit and small apartment complexes and townhomes in wealthy communities in large counties including Los Angeles.

The bill would not spell the end of single-family housing in the state. Developers could continue to build such homes on their land if they chose, and the legislation prohibits the demolition of single-family homes to build fourplexes without further government review. Even so, allowing as many as four homes on land where now just one is permitted would trigger significant change compared with how California has grown over much of the last century.

Nearly two-thirds of the residences in California are single-family homes, according to U.S. Census data. And between half and three-quarters of the developable land in much of the state is zoned for single-family housing only, according to a 2018 survey by UC Berkeley's Turner Center for Housing Innovation that included responses from half the state's cities and counties.

The state can no longer dedicate that much land to single-family housing if California is to become more affordable and if political leaders want to meet aggressive goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, said Carol Galante, director of the Turner Center.

"I do not think it's possible to solve housing affordability problems and meet climate change goals without dealing with this issue of single-family homes only," Galante said. "We have population growth. We have job growth. People need to live somewhere, and they're now competing for a very limited supply."

But doing away with single-family-only zoning would unalterably diminish California for current and future residents, said Zev Yaroslavsky, director of the Los Angeles Initiative at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and a former Los Angeles County supervisor.

“When people around the world think of L.A., one of the things they think of is a home with a backyard,” Yaroslavsky said. “I think much of it should be preserved.”

In the city of Los Angeles, 62% of the developable area is zoned for single-family homes only. Neighborhoods such as Tarzana, Bel-Air, Brentwood and Jefferson Park are examples of communities dominated by single-family zoning.

In San Francisco, the percentage of land zoned for single-family homes only is much smaller — about 37% — and includes the Sunset District, Forest Hill, Excelsior, Portola and other neighborhoods concentrated in the city’s south and west.

But by other metrics, the city still reserves a lot of its land for low-density building. Nearly three-quarters of the privately owned parcels in San Francisco are zoned for single-family homes or duplexes only, according to the city’s planning department.

Across the state, communities big and small, wealthy and poor, north and south, coastal and inland have large sections zoned for single-family homes. The wealthy Bay Area town of Atherton sets aside at least 95% of its land for single-family housing, according to the UC Berkeley survey. Between half and three-quarters of the developable land in Sacramento and Stockton is also reserved for single-family homes, the survey said.

Recently, policymakers in California and across the country have scrutinized single-family zoning as housing affordability problems have become more acute.

Three years ago, state legislators passed two bills aimed at making it easier to build small accessory homes in backyards. Since then, applications to build secondary units have increased by the hundreds in Los Angeles, San Francisco and other larger coastal communities.

In some areas in counties with more than 600,000 residents, including Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, Santa Clara and San Francisco, Wiener’s bill would also allow larger apartment buildings on land previously zoned single-family only — though local height limits would remain intact. To qualify for density increases, such neighborhoods would have to be high-income and near quality jobs and public schools.

Mayors in some of California’s biggest cities are considering doing away with zoning that only allows for single-family homes. At a housing forum in the Bay Area last week, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf and Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg said they supported ending single-family only zoning in their communities while San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo said his city was considering doing so. The trio has endorsed SB 50, as has San Francisco Mayor London Breed.

Earlier this year, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, who hasn’t taken a position on SB 50, told The Times he was considering a proposal that would allow triplexes in the city’s single-family communities.

“You could have one generation of a family, their parents, their kids in the back house, all living together,” Garcetti said. “That would probably overnight add about 50% more housing stock to Los Angeles in a way that is also neighborhood compatible.”

Garcetti cited Minneapolis as inspiration for the idea. In 2018, Minneapolis became the nation’s first big city to do away with single-family zoning by allowing duplexes and triplexes on parcels that previously allowed just one home. Conversation there focused on the history of single-family zoning, which originated out of the desire to exclude poor people or nonwhites from certain communities.

In the early 20th century, court rulings blocked zoning rules that explicitly barred nonwhite people from living in certain neighborhoods. But in 1926 the U.S. Supreme Court decided that proposals allowing only single-family homes in neighborhoods were constitutional, even though many supporters of those plans pushed the zoning as a means to segregate their communities, according to the book “Segregation by Design” by Jessica Trounstein, an associate professor at UC Merced.

In addition, racist deed covenants barred people from selling homes to nonwhites, and government sponsored lending practices provided low-cost mortgages only to whites through the middle of the 20th century.

Some single-family neighborhoods have changed over time — many communities in South L.A., for example, that once were reserved for whites are now home to predominantly black and Latino residents. But the exclusionary effects of single-family zoning remain today, especially between low-density suburbs and their higher-density neighbors, Trounstein said.

“Communities with a predominance of single-family homes still contribute to race and class segregation,” she said.

Trounstein believes that even if SB 50 passes, wealthier single-family-only communities will still take advantage of the bill’s restrictions or use other political or legal means to ensure their areas remain as they are.

As it stands, the bill has limits on where developers could build fourplexes. Under the legislation, developers would not be able to demolish a single-family house to build a fourplex without local government approval, but a single-family home could be remodeled into a fourplex if it doesn’t increase in size by more than 15%. The bill also places restrictions on building fourplexes in single-family areas that are in floodplains, communities at high risk of wildfire and some historic zones.

These limitations would blunt the bill’s ability to spur construction of fourplexes in single-family-only neighborhoods, says Mott Smith, a principal at Civic Enterprise Development in Los Angeles. But he still expects a significant number of property owners to be able to take advantage.

Voice of San Diego

San Diego County Is Disregarding Fire Risk to an Astonishing Degree

California can't solve its housing shortages with homes that are essentially built to burn.

Tiffany Yap

May 16, 2019

As San Diego County prepares for another wildfire season, California is re-evaluating its approach to fire risk. But have county officials and state leaders drawn the right lessons from last year's tragic conflagrations in Paradise and Malibu?

Fire experts applauded when a new [report](#) from Gov. Gavin Newsom's wildfire strike force rightly noted two key contributors to our state's fire risk: Both climate change and [the construction of more homes in the wildland-urban interface](#) "magnify the wildfire threat and place substantially more people and property at risk than ever before."

A [new University of California study](#) mirrored that report's conclusions, finding that housing and human infrastructure in fire-prone wilderness areas are the main drivers of fire ignitions and structure loss. To reduce this risk, the governor's strike force recommended building homes away from wildfire-prone areas and retrofitting existing homes with fire-reduction features.

Troublingly, Newsom himself expressed reservations about curbing sprawl development in fire-prone wilderness areas. The governor worried it might violate the "wild and pioneering spirit" of Californians.

Newsom has rightly committed to averting further tragedy from fire, but to do so he must heed his own experts and avoid giving cover to local officials who want to ignore how poorly planned development feeds fire dangers.

In San Diego, the Board of Supervisors has disregarded fire risk to an astonishing degree. Supervisors have recently approved or will soon consider the approval of eight large developments that would collectively build almost [14,000 homes in places naturally prone to fire](#).

These developments, including Newland Sierra and the Otay Ranch Villages, would be located in or near areas where fires have historically burned. State agencies like Cal Fire have identified these areas as posing a very high fire threat to people.

Based on Census Bureau estimates, these eight projects could put about 40,000 new residents at risk, not to mention the risk to firefighters and first responders who will be called on to protect lives and homes when the next fires hit.

County officials aren't alone in approving such risky developments. With the Fanita Ranch project, the city of Santee is considering the construction of about 3,000 homes with almost 9,000 residents within areas designated by Cal Fire as [very high fire hazard zones](#).

Sprawl development has many harmful consequences, from destruction of wildlife habitat to increased air pollution from long commutes. But one of its worst outcomes is heightened fire risk.

The developments in San Diego County would be built in areas dominated by chaparral, sage scrub and grasslands. These native California habitats are adapted to survive fires, but when fires occur too frequently, indigenous plants are replaced by non-native grasses that further increase fire threat.

Putting houses in the heart of fire country doesn't just put people in harm's way. It also increases the risk of fires starting. Studies have found that 97 percent of wildfires in Southern California's Mediterranean landscapes are ignited by human sources like power lines and equipment sparks.

Climate change is ramping up the threat. The state is getting hotter and drier, creating ideal fire conditions, as scientists explained in the federal government's 2018 [National Climate Assessment](#).

None of this should be news to San Diego County officials.

Nearly 1,000 homes have burned every year in Southern California since 2000. The county has seen big fires, including the 2014 Cocos Fire, which burned in and around areas where developers now want to build two of the planned projects — the Valiano development and Harmony Grove Village South.

In their defense, county officials have pointed to fire-mitigation practices built into these projects. But these measures will not be enough to protect the people who move here.

Even the best mitigation can't make a development fire-proof. Homes can add fuel to fires. Even with state-required fire-resistant roofing and vents, property owners must be vigilant by maintaining defensible space and keeping flammable materials a safe distance away from homes.

Despite false claims by the Trump administration, more logging won't stop fires or reduce such threats, and neither will clear-cutting chaparral. Instead, we need better land-use planning that puts community safety first by recognizing that California ecosystems — including those in San Diego — will continue to experience fires.

Wildfires are natural processes in the state. To protect families, firefighters and native biodiversity, politicians have to stop letting developers build in areas prone to blazes. California can't solve its housing shortages with homes that are essentially built to burn.

Tiffany Yap is a scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Oakland.

San Francisco Chronicle

Supes Oppose Plan To Reactivate Railway Through Popular Richmond Park

Bay City News Service

Published 4:24 pm PDT, Tuesday, May 21, 2019

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday morning for a motion backing the East Bay Regional Park District's opposition to reactivating a section of old railroad that goes through the Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline Park in Richmond.

The tracks are owned by BNSF Railway Company, a Berkshire Hathaway company owned by Warren Buffett. It used to serve Richmond's Terminal 1 and Ferry Point, before the surrounding real estate was purchased and converted into a public park.

Running trains through that park now would create a significant safety hazard, especially for children, according to county staff. However, BNSF sent the district a letter threatening to legally challenge public access back in October.

"It's just a bad idea for BNSF to do this," Supervisor John Gioia said while introducing the matter.

In addition to the risk of injury or death associated with pedestrians struck by trains, reactivating the railway would present a health risk due to increased diesel emissions. Rail traffic in the area could involve train cars carrying hazardous materials.

Given the scenic nature of the shoreline, there would also be visual impacts.

"This is a very, very frustrating situation," park district General Manager Robert Doyle, who happened to be in Martinez for jury duty, said during public comment.

"This is truly an environmental justice issue for the people of Richmond," Doyle added.

Other people who spoke up during public comment, including the presidents of several Richmond neighborhood councils, were unanimous in their opposition to running trains through the park.

"Don't let the railroad railroad us," Bruce Beyaert said. "They've really gone off the tracks."

BNSF spokesperson Lena Kent said in a statement Tuesday afternoon that there have been tough negotiations with the park district dating back to at least the 1960s, when these tracks were owned by the Santa Fe Railway.

BNSF has offered to relocate the tracks on a different path through the park as part of a joint-use plan that would include building a trail along the current right-of-way.

"Moving the rail line away from the shore and providing a trail in the current rail line location makes practical sense and is a much better environmental outcome than the Park's present plan, which will face regulatory and environmental hurdles," Kent said. "We look forward to continuing to work in good faith with the Park District on a joint-use plan."

When asked about that part of the plan, however, district staff told the supervisors it isn't viable.

As a result of the board's unanimous vote, the county will be writing a letter to BNSF asking them to abandon their plans immediately. They'll also be contacting the appropriate regulatory agencies, and asking their legislative advocates at the state and federal level to oppose the reactivation of the tracks.

Meanwhile, the office of the county counsel has been directed to work with the city of Richmond and the park district in search of a legal remedy.

The Richmond City Council is scheduled to consider a resolution opposing the railway's plans at their meeting Tuesday, which starts at 6:30 p.m. in the council chambers at 440 Civic Center Plaza.

The meeting for the agenda is available online at <https://bit.ly/30zCLRZ>.

Los Angeles Times

Late-season rains mask looming fire danger as lush plants turn dry and explosive

By [Joseph Serna](#) and [Hannah Fry](#)

May 24, 2019 | 5:55 AM



Invasive mustard grass grows along the hiking trails in Griffith Park last month. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

Giant green stems with budding yellow flowers greeted hikers along a narrow path beneath the soaring Santa Monica Mountains on a recent drizzly day.

This is where, just seven months ago, the worst fire in Los Angeles County history swept through, destroying more than 1,000 homes and blackening miles of hillsides and canyon. But thanks to one of the wettest seasons in years, rains have transformed the fire zone back to life with great speed.

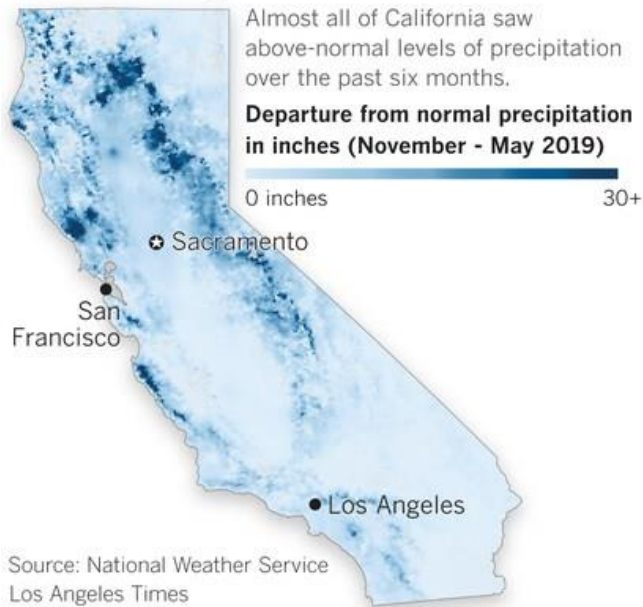
[And all those flowering black mustard plants](#) point to a looming disaster once the rains finally end and Southern California shifts to its dry, hot, windy summer and fall.

California's [wet winter is set to extend](#) well into May thanks to some new storms, but fire experts and climatologists said the extra moisture is likely to worsen the fire outlook because it will allow brush to grow even more.

Mike Mohler, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, estimates that this latest rainstorm will create at least the third layer of dried, dead grass that will blanket the state through the summer and into the fall.

“It will probably cure and die in the next seven to 10 days,” he said. “Now we have all that fuel bed again.”

An abnormally wet winter



(Priya Krishnakumar / Los Angeles Times Graphics)

Wet springs have historically been linked to more severe fires later in the year across much of the state, as the added moisture allows for increased vegetation growth, experts say.

In areas hit repeatedly by fires, [non-native plants — like mustard — can grow faster than native species](#). Those plants eventually dry out during warm summer months and become fuel for wildfires. There are also still tens of millions of drought- and bark beetle-ravaged dead trees standing in the Sierra, ready to act as kindling for the next big blaze.

“The good news is we need the water, but the bad news is it’s building the fuel load for what has always been our fire season,” said Bill Patzert, a local weather expert and former climatologist with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

A look at recent fire activity in the Central Valley and inland desert provide a sense of what the future could hold for the fire season across much of the state, Mohler said.

Earlier this month, Kern County firefighters scrambled to extinguish a wind-driven grass fire that ran across [2,500 acres in a day](#). In Thermal, a vegetation fire that broke out Saturday night grew amid 50 mph winds to [more than 100 acres](#) and injured a firefighter in the process.

“That’s almost a precursor to what we can see statewide,” Mohler warned.

The placement of the jet stream, a high-altitude river of air running from the Pacific across the United States, is a key factor playing into the state’s unusually wet and snowy May. The meandering jet stream has hammered California with a series of storms out of the South Pacific through winter and into the spring.

The atmospheric rivers that have made up much of this winter’s rain has [bolstered the snowpack](#) — a key source of the state’s water supply — [filled reservoirs](#) and streams, and [lifted California](#)

[out of drought](#) conditions for the first time in nearly a decade. However, the storms typically move too fast and dump too much water at one time to have the kinds of long-lasting benefits California's parched soil needs.

Experts say the widespread rainfall will likely delay the start of the state's grass fire season, which typically begins in May or early June, by at least a few weeks.

Also, most of California's native grasses have gone dormant for the season and won't sprout for the latest storms, said Robert Krohn, a U.S. Forest Service meteorologist in Riverside County.

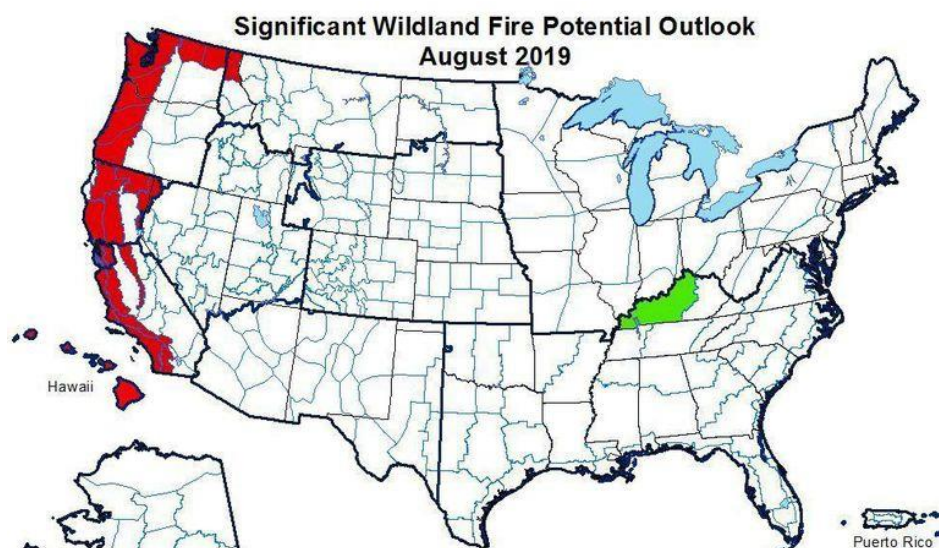
"We're just stalling for time going into the drier part of the year," Krohn said.

Indeed, [a report published](#) earlier this month by the [National Interagency Fire Center](#) found that while the fire season was off to a slow start, California can still expect "above normal" potential for large wildfires this summer as heavy crops of grasses sprouted by the wet winter dry out.

Below-normal wildland fire potential is expected in the southern Sierra in June and July thanks to [the heavy snowpack](#) slowly melting. But heavy grass loads and a [high number of dead trees](#) in the Sierra foothills will lead to above-normal fire potential in many lower-elevation valleys.

Southern California experienced the typical transition from cool, rainy weather to a warmer, drier pattern in April, and most storms that hit the West Coast were too far north or weren't wet enough to provide widespread rain, according to the [National Interagency Fire Center's outlook report](#).

The study said cooler temperatures could help Southern California during its fire season.



California and the west coast have heightened wildfire risk this summer (National Interagency Fire Center)

But by June, the mountains and forests around the Bay Area as well as the Sacramento Valley and nearby foothills are projected to have above-normal fire potential. The areas with above-normal fire potential are expected to expand north to the Oregon border in August. The report also noted that there is a large number of dead and downed trees and plants in the northern

Sacramento Valley because of a heavy snowstorm in February that caused extensive damage. That will increase the potential of significant wildfires.

In 2017, heavy rains were followed by devastating fires that hit wine country. Krohn said that the conditions there are different from what Southern California experienced this year.

In 2017, Southern California received the bulk of its rain in the late fall and early winter before the spigot was completely shut off by March, essentially “flash-drying” the landscape, Krohn said.

This year, the storms are stretched out, giving communities time to prepare. Once the storms are gone the area is poised to see some grass fire activity within two or three weeks after the final rainfall.

“Take advantage,” Mohler said. “Take this window — don’t get a false sense of security — to clear your property while moistures are up. Work on evacuation plans. Almost take this as a call to action. This doesn’t happen every often.”

Officials are particularly concerned about the [yellow bloom](#) of the invasive plant *Brassica nigra*, better known as black mustard, that have covered the hillsides throughout the Santa Monica Mountains and much of the West.

The tough plant [germinates early in winter before](#) native plants have taken hold, shoots up more than 6 feet tall, hogs the sunlight with its thick stalks and lays down a deep system of roots that beats out native plants for water. The weeds tend to dry up by July or August, and along with invasive European grasses they serve as kindling during Southern California’s long wildfire season.

In the Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks in Tulare County, prescribed burns that typically happen in the spring may have to wait until the summer, park spokesman Mike Theune said. That could include one in the area near the General Sherman tree set for a few weeks from now, he said.

Even those burns will only happen if conditions are right and firefighters aren’t busy battling a blaze elsewhere.

“What our concern becomes is, eventually the grasses and other vegetation will dry out. We don’t want to let our guard down. We want to remain vigilant because at some point a wildfire *will* happen,” he said.

“Just because it’s raining now — four months from now, six months from now — no one is going to remember when everything is dried or cured.”

Times staff writers Richard Winton, Javier Panzar and Ralph Vartabedian contributed to this report.



Published May 29, 2019

Firefighters and MOFD board clash over staffing

By Nick Marnell

With a projected \$1.8 million surplus in its 2019-20 fiscal year operating budget, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board, despite pleas from the firefighters, chose to not restore full-time staffing of the ambulance at Fire Station 45 in Orinda, but opted to allocate the extra money to fund its pension stabilization and retiree health care trusts.

In 2013, with the financial problems brought about by the Great Recession, the district cut its daily on-duty staffing from 19 to 17 personnel, changing the Station 45 ambulance from fully staffed to cross-staffed; meaning, unlike Station 41 which has an engine company and a dedicated two-person ambulance crew, Station 45 has only a three-person engine company which also responds to medical calls in its ambulance when so dispatched, leaving that portion of Orinda unprotected.

To help beef up staffing, Battalion Chief Jerry Lee applied for a federal grant under the Staffing for Fire and Emergency Response program in 2016. The district requested the grant to hire four firefighters "to restore the designated 2-person ambulance company (Medic 145) at Station 45," as Lee wrote twice in the application.

MOFD was awarded the \$1.4 million SAFER grant in 2017, but Lee explained to the district board that it was not bound to any specific staffing model by accepting the money, notwithstanding what he wrote in the application.

"The grant is not concerned with your daily staffing, just the overall staffing," wrote Danielle Shelton of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which runs the SAFER program. The district had to hire four new firefighters for the three years of the grant performance period and was committed to not laying off any of them for those three years.

Based on that guidance, the board voted in 2017 to accept the SAFER grant, but declined to require the full-time staffing of Medic 145, deferring any other staffing option to a future date. As a result, MOFD daily staffing remained at 17, with the four SAFER firefighters used to fill daily vacancies.

That staffing model has not sat well with the firefighters, who have continuously lobbied the MOFD board to restore mandatory daily staffing to the prerecession level of 19. They pushed to include a staffing increase in the 2019-20 district budget, adamant that the SAFER grant money should be used for what it was intended - restoring the full-time ambulance at Station 45.

"All that is needed is a new directive from the current board to change the existing directive from the previous board as to how the personnel hired under the SAFER grant are to be used," said Capt. Mark McCullah, district labor representative. "The proposed 2020 budget accounts for a total of 57 firefighters, or 19 per day, which are all the personnel necessary to restaff a full-time ambulance at Station 45."

The district does not see it that way. Fire Chief Dave Winnacker explained that if daily minimum staffing were increased from 17 to 19, the district would incur a minimum of \$1 million in additional overtime expense, or the staffing change would require an increase in the number of rostered firefighters from 57 to 63, boosting payroll by \$1.4 million.

At the May 15 district meeting, the MOFD board did not issue the directive that McCullah sought, voting to use the operational surplus to fund its pension stabilization and retiree health care trusts to help offset the \$49 million of district net pension liability and \$15 million of net retiree health care liability. The board directed Winnacker to maintain the daily minimum staffing of 17 firefighters.

"I would not want to see those positions funded if it's to the detriment of the district," said MOFD President Steven Danziger, regarding the full-time staffing of Medic 145. "But if it's going to make our community safer and our firefighters safer, we need to take a further look at it."

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Published May 29, 2019

What exactly is a shaded fuel break anyway?

By Nick Marnell

Thanks to the initiative of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, a systematic study by the state fire agency and rapid action by the governor, work on the North Orinda Shaded Fuel Break project will soon begin on the northern edges of Lamorinda.



But what is a shaded fuel break?

According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, fuel breaks are wide strips of land where trees and vegetation have been reduced or removed. A shaded fuel break is constructed in a forest-type setting, not unlike the northern rim of the NOSFB project along Bear Creek Road and the Lafayette Ridge. As shown in the photos, the vegetation at ground level has been removed, and the tree canopy has been thinned, reducing the likelihood that a dangerous wildfire will head into an urban area.

Photo Sora O'Doherty Before and after photo Photo courtesy Cal Firey

At a May 22 public meeting in Orinda, MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker outlined the details of the fuel break project to about 50 attendees. The chief explained how hot, dry, north and northeast winds descend upon Lamorinda in the fall, bringing the potential of a serious wildfire as occurred in 1923 and in 1991 in the East Bay hills. The fuel break will reduce this threat to Lamorinda.

The idea to create the shaded fuel break was presented to Cal Fire by MOFD Battalion Chief Jerry Lee in November. The state fire agency expanded the breadth of the proposal and presented it to Gov. Gavin Newsom in January, who expedited the project, along with 34 others in high-risk wildfire areas of California. MOFD, the de facto project manager, has partnered with various public agencies to complete the work that encompasses 14 miles of open space between Tilden Park and Acalanes High School.

Winnacker explained that the \$4 million, seven-month project will begin in mid-June, and Orinda residents should be prepared for smoke as prescribed burns of annual grasses get underway. Road closures may be necessary but major Lamorinda arteries should not be impacted.

Environmental issues were of concern to the public. Though Newsom has exempted the project from state environmental regulations, Winnacker explained that federal and local regulations will be closely followed and monitored by a biologist and an archaeologist. Nesting birds will not be displaced. Even with all of the fuel removal, the natural appearance of the area will be preserved.

The chief stressed that the fuel break is only one part of a system to reduce the regional threat of a wildfire, and reminded homeowners about the critical need to create defensible space around their property. He also urged residents to sign up for the county Community Warning System, to schedule a date for the MOFD wood chipper to come to their neighborhood and to regularly check the Ready for Wildfire website.

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San Francisco Chronicle

1 million Californians use tainted water. Will state pass a clean-water tax?

[Alexei Koseff](#) May 30, 2019 Updated: **May 30, 2019** 4 a.m.



Resident Jose Hernandez uses large containers to collect rainwater for his garden at the San Jerardo Cooperative where he lives. Water that comes through the local water system is expensive, he says. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

SAN JERARDO, Monterey County — José Hernández has two plastic barrels in his front yard, filled to the brim with water collected during the recent rains. Half a dozen buckets, a trash can and a cooking pot sit close by, nearly overflowing.

It should be enough for Hernández to tend to his garden for the next few weeks — and slight relief for a water bill that sets him back \$130 to \$170 each month. A retired farmworker, Hernández, 64, supports his wife and two daughters primarily on a \$950 monthly Social Security check.

In San Jerardo, a farmworker cooperative in Salinas, water is a precious — and expensive — commodity. The 250 or so residents have long been plagued by water contaminated by agricultural runoff from the surrounding cauliflower, broccoli and strawberry fields. Their bills more than quadrupled nine years ago when the county dug a new well for San Jerardo, pumping clean water from two miles away.

Hundreds of communities, and more than 1 million Californians, facing a similar struggle for safe and affordable water are now at the center of a budget fight at the state Capitol over how to fix the problem. After several failed attempts, there is momentum this legislative session to establish a fund for small water agencies unable to provide customers with clean drinking water because of the high treatment costs.

But several hurdles remain before the June 15 deadline for the Legislature to pass a budget — most precariously, a resistance among lawmakers to tax millions of residential water users and others while California enjoys a surplus of more than \$21 billion.

Activists and Gov. Gavin Newsom have pushed to establish a dedicated clean-water fee on customers and agribusiness that would not be at risk of cuts if the economy sours. Many lawmakers, however, prefer that the money come from the state's general fund, not another tax.

“If this was a problem in Beverly Hills, people would be outraged,” said Kelsey Hinton, communications manager for the Community Water Center, which works on drinking water access in California and has been sponsoring legislation to establish a clean water fund since 2016.

“It’s not that solutions to this problem don’t exist. It’s about historically where the resources and attention in our state have gone for these issues.”



Residents in San Jerardo Cooperative have to pay a \$72 per month fee on their water bills. They worry it may go higher.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Statewide, 372 water agencies serving nearly 1 million of California's almost 40 million residents are [out of compliance](#) with state standards on contamination levels or treatment techniques. Advocates say the number is even higher when including people in those areas who rely on private wells.

The pollution is largely concentrated in agricultural communities in the Central Valley and Salinas Valley. Water systems there are often contaminated by nitrates from pesticides, fertilizer runoff and dairy waste, and arsenic, which scientists [believe](#) is released into aquifers by overpumping. Cancer-causing chemicals have been found in the groundwater in some places.

State-mandated testing has also [identified](#) hundreds of schools, many of them in urban areas, with elevated lead levels from corroding pipes and taps.

Federal drinking water grants are available, and California has provided some assistance in the past. Proposition 1, a bond measure that voters approved in 2014, set aside \$260 million to help small, poor communities pay for water treatment projects.

But operating and maintaining those systems after they are built is another challenge. The clean-water fund that Newsom proposed in his budget plan would be the first source dedicated to that purpose.

Lanare, an unincorporated town of about 600 in Fresno County, opened a \$1.3 million facility in 2007 to treat its arsenic-tainted drinking water. Six months later, the local water district [shut down](#) the plant because it was too expensive to operate. It has remained idle since then.

“Great, you have a water treatment plant. How are you going to pay for that without doubling, tripling water costs?” said Hinton of the Community Water Center.



Horacio Amezcuita, general manager of the San Jerardo Cooperative, is seen with the first and now outdated water system.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

San Jerardo first found out that its water was not safe to drink in 1990. Residents shut down the well and dug another, but that well also became contaminated within three years. A third well became too polluted to use by 2001.

For years, Monterey County provided San Jerardo with bottled water. Then residents began complaining about rashes and ill health that they believed was caused by their use of the toxic water to bathe and wash their clothes. The county installed a filtration system, and in 2010 dug the well that San Jerardo now relies on.

It's expensive to operate, so the county is looking to sell the system to a private company, which residents fear would raise their rates even higher. They already pay a \$72 connection fee on their monthly bills.

Twenty miles away, at a farmworkers camp near Soledad, Maria Ramirez and her family spend about \$9 to fill up three five-gallon water bottles twice a week.

Three years ago, camp residents were told their water was contaminated with coliform bacteria and should be boiled. Since then, the owner has provided each household with an extra five-gallon bottle weekly.

Ramirez, 29, carefully plans out the meals she makes for her husband and two young daughters to avoid using too much drinking water on beans, soup or rice. But she still cleans and washes with the camp water, even though it makes her feel itchy when she showers.

Ramirez said her family is willing to make the sacrifice because their rent would be several hundred dollars more in town: "That's how us Mexicans take it," she said.



Horacio Amezcuita, general manager of San Jerardo Cooperative walks by an outdated water system. The community is on its fourth well since 1990, due to pollutants in the first three.

Photo: Photos by Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Newsom signaled his commitment to the clean water fund in the first week of his governorship, when he [visited](#) a community in Stanislaus County that had been forced to rely on bottled water after its wells were polluted with nitrates and arsenic.

His [plan](#) would raise about \$140 million a year by taxing fertilizer sales and milk production, charging dairies a fee and adding a monthly surcharge to Californians' water bills. Most

customers would pay an extra 95 cents a month, though the surcharge would be as high as \$10 for the largest users.

Agricultural interests, which say they need to help solve a problem they created, generally support the idea. But water agencies object that it would raise costs for consumers and complicate their business by turning them into tax collectors.

“We think it’s not good policy to tax a resource that is essential to life,” said Cindy Tuck, deputy executive director for government relations for the Association of California Water Agencies. “It would work against water affordability.”

There appears to be support for the governor’s approach in the Assembly, which has steadily advanced a [bill](#) by Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella (Riverside County), that proposes a similar mix of fertilizer and dairy taxes and a monthly surcharge of 50 cents for water users. Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, a Paramount (Los Angeles County) Democrat who rarely carries his own legislation, recently signed on as a co-author.

But in the Senate, Democrats have resisted fee plans. Earlier this month, several lawmakers settled on a proposal, backed by Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, to set aside \$150 million in the budget each year. Senate Democrats said their plan “strengthens the middle class with no new taxes on middle- and lower-income Californians.”

Advocates of a dedicated fund worry that the money would be on the chopping block the next time the state has budget problems. Newsom and legislative leaders will work through their different approaches during budget negotiations over the next two weeks.

Residents in San Jerardo, meanwhile, wonder how much longer their fourth well will last.

Horacio Amezcuita, the cooperative’s general manager, said the arsenic level in their water has doubled over the past decade, as farmers pumped more groundwater during the drought. Tests last year found as much as 8 micrograms per liter of arsenic in the water — anything above 10 is considered unsafe.

“Your land is worthless,” Amezcuita said, “if you don’t have clean water.”

*Alexei Koseff is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: alexi.koseff@sfchronicle.com
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The Press

Solution to public safety crisis presented to Brentwood residents

- East County Voters for Equal Protection, Brentwood
- **May 30, 2019** Updated 19 hrs ago

Editor: This past Tuesday afternoon, more than two dozen mostly Brentwood residents learned just how bad the public safety services situation is in East Contra Costa County, and what they could do to help improve the dangerous situation.

With coordination and promotional help from Mike Sloan, residents of the Summerset IV community gathered in the Lodge ballroom and heard Bryan Scott, Chair of East County Voters for Equal Protection (ECV), describe the dramatic under-funding of the local fire district, East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD). Because of this under-funding, ECCFPD is unable to respond to emergency calls for significant periods of time each month.

In 2018, this time totaled over one full 24-hour day each quarter. ECCFPD is unable to fight a structure fire, like a house fire, without receiving the assistance of six firefighters and two fire engines from a neighboring fire district. Response times throughout the 249-square mile jurisdiction of ECCFPD far exceed industry standards, causing increased risk to life and property of area residents.

A workable solution to this government-pending problem was also presented.

Scott described a grass-roots plan to increase public safety services funding by nearly \$9 million in the region, with no increase in taxes, using the voter initiative process. A summary of the ‘Brentwood Emergency Response for All Initiative’ was distributed, and Scott described how the initiative’s plan would require the cities of Brentwood and Oakley to spend \$7,912,005 of the growth in sales and property-tax revenues on public safety services, as defined in California’s Fire Protection District Law of 1987.

There would be no new taxes, and the plan would be a first step to correct an egregious fiscal policy. The initiative process is defined in the California constitution and has been used repeatedly since it was enacted in 1911 to cure legislative inactivity.

ECCFPD has stated publically and in press releases that it is unable to provide adequate service to area residents. This under-funding problem has been documented by the county’s grand jury, the Local Agency Formation Commission, an inter-governmental task force and fire services industry consultants. Previous attempts to remedy the under-funding situation involved various forms of new taxes – attempts which all failed.

ECV is now engaged in fundraising the nearly \$50,000 necessary to cover the costs of getting the two voter initiatives, in Brentwood and Oakley, on the November 2020 ballot.

Checks can be mailed to East County Voters for Equal Protection, 1300 Crescent Drive, Brentwood, CA, 94513. Donations may be made online at <https://donorbox.org/east-county-public-safety-services>.

East County Voters for Equal Protection is a nonpartisan citizens' action committee whose aim is to improve funding for the ECCFPD. They can be reached at scott.bryan@comcast.net or 925-418-4428.

The group's Facebook page is www.facebook.com/EastCountyVoters.