

California Governor Touts Wildfire Prevention Spending

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Phil Barber, The Press Democrat

The San Francisco Bay Bridge and city skyline are obscured in orange smoke and haze as their seen from Treasure Island in San Francisco, California on September 9, 2020. (Photo by BRITTANY HOSEA-SMALL/AFP via Getty Images/TNS)

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(TNS) - Behind Gov. Gavin Newsom as he stepped to the podium to address the media on Thursday, and the Cal Fire personnel arrayed at his back, and the shiny trucks and helicopters meant to symbolize the state's investment in firefighting equipment, were hills that had been scorched by the deadly Atlas Fire in 2017.

Wildfire is never far from the conversation here in this flame-scarred region of Northern California, which made the Cal Fire station just east of Napa a natural setting for Newsom's recap on all his administration has done to boost fire preparedness and resilience since he took office in 2019.

"Here we are near the end of peak fire season — not the end of fire season," Newsom said after a quick briefing inside the station from Cal Fire Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit Chief Mike Marcucci.

"As we have all acknowledged, fire season is now year-round," the governor said.

The visit came five years after the historic firestorm that ravaged Napa and Sonoma counties, and four years after the Camp Fire laid waste to Paradise in Butte County, taking over as California's worst-ever wildfire.

Still, a warming, drought-parched California is substantially better prepared to meet that challenge than it was a few years ago, Newsom argued.

He had substantial evidence to back up the claim. The state has spent \$2.8 billion on equipment, fuel reduction and home- and community-hardening over the past two years.

Much of that has been devoted to removing brush in fire zones, largely through prescribed burns. Cal Fire has done more than 100,000 acres of fuel mitigation each year since 2019.

The state firefighting agency caught a break from mild weather this fall, allowing personnel an unexpected chance to handle an additional 20,000 acres in the past two months, Newsom said.

"We recognize we have not made up for 100 years of neglect in that space," the governor added. "And yes, before you state the obvious, let me state the obvious. We have a lot more work to do."

To that end, the state has entered into a deal with the federal government — "with support of an administration that has their hand out, not their fist out," as Newsom put it, comparing Joe Biden's White House to that of Donald Trump. The goal is to mitigate 1 million acres total by 2025.

"Based upon what we just heard, I'm confident we'll get there," Newsom said.

Much of the money being thrown at fire safety has gone toward new equipment. Currently, according to Newsom, Cal Fire is staffing 356 engines throughout California. On Monday, the agency will be drawing that back to 243 engines for the winter months.

Cal Fire has stocked up on a dozen Sikorsky Firehawk helicopters in the past few years — they boast a quicker response time and carry more water — and this year added new aircraft able to fly night missions.

The state also contracts with private companies that offer 18 helicopters and six fixed-wing planes. Those contracted craft have flown more than 2,700 hours this year, said Cal Fire Director Joe Tyler.

And in 2023, Newsom said, California will get the first of seven massive C-130 tanker planes.

This mobilization is already paying dividends, the representatives argued.

Marcucci, the local Cal Fire chief, offered the Old Fire as an example. A month and a half before that fire moved downslope from Atlas Peak and burned 600 acres in June, making it the North Bay's largest blaze of 2022, Cal Fire had completed work on a six-mile fuel break along Soda Canyon Road, in partnership with the Napa County Fire Department and the Napa Community Firewise Foundation.

"And you can see where the fire pretty much stopped at Soda Canyon Road," Marcucci told Newsom during the firehouse briefing. "It allowed firefighters to get in front of it. So that return on investment was instant. The fire wouldn't have ended up way it did if we hadn't had the ability to slow it down."

No homes were lost in the Old Fire.

Not everyone would agree with the rosy assessment offered by Newsom and his team. A pair of news accounts slammed Cal Fire almost simultaneously in June.

The first, by the nonprofit newsroom CalMatters, accused the state agency of overworking its fire crews through mandated 21-day shifts and forced overtime. The grueling wildfire seasons of the past few years, the report stated, are contributing to high levels of on-the-job injuries and mental trauma. The result has been an exodus from the agency, with 10% of Cal Fire's permanent, nonseasonal workforce leaving in the prior year.

California added 1,350 personnel this year to help reduce that stress, Newsom said.

Questioned about the psychological needs of Cal Fire personnel, the governor pointed to \$55 million made available last year for the health of public safety staff, including firefighters but also law enforcement.

"We are very mindful of the importance of mindfulness, and wellness more broadly defined," Newsom said.

The other damning June report, from a public media collaborative called the California Newsroom, pointed out that Cal Fire's strategy had emphasized emergency firefighting over healthy forest management. The collaborative's investigation found the agency's forestry hires had remained stagnant while its firefighting staff soared, and that it had taken years to implement laws pass by the California Legislature, among other shortcomings.

Leroy Westerling, a UC Merced professor who specializes in climate-ecosystem-

wildfire interactions, applauded much of the work the state has been doing.

That includes funding a climate assessment process he has been involved in — it helps document changes in fuels and vegetation — and addressing inequities in poorer communities that tend to bear the brunt of particulate pollution from wildfires.

"I think just anecdotally, from living in a fire-prone area, it's clear the state has ramped up the available equipment, positioning crews and things like that," Westerling said. "They've been able to keep after it and keep things under control with a bunch of fires that really had the potential to be a problem this year."

There is also room for improvement, Westerling said.

He'd like to see California's government work more effectively with federal agencies, considering 57% of the land mass in the state, including national forest and parks, is federally owned. And he believes there's need for more robust public communication about the threat we're all facing, and what our parched landscape is likely to look like if this era of drought continues.

"We need to figure out how to communicate those changes and make communities more resilient," Westerling said. "It's not like we're gonna return the landscape to how it looked in the past. It's about how it's gonna be in the future."

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