

Environmental Protection Agency cuts threaten wildfire recovery efforts

As California faces the aftermath of devastating wildfires like the Eaton and Palisades Fires, the state's recovery efforts may be hindered by significant staff cuts at the EPA, which could slow hazardous waste removal and ongoing environmental monitoring, ultimately affecting future wildfire response.

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A burnt-down house stands in ruins, a stark reminder of the devastation caused by the Eaton Fire in Altadena, California. | This art was created with the assistance of Shutterstock AI tools

As California grapples with the fallout of destructive wildfires including the Eaton Fire and Palisades Fire, the state's recovery efforts for these and future wildfires may face another potential challenge in the form of deep staff cuts by the Trump Administration and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency to federal agencies including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. While these EPA staff cuts are often discussed in the context of deregulation, they may have significant impacts on California's ability to recover quickly from these recent and future wildfires.

More than 300 non-politically appointed career employees have reportedly departed the EPA since Donald Trump was re-elected President on Nov. 5, 2024. That number was reported before Judge George O'Toole, Jr. of the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts lifted a temporary restraining order on Feb. 12, 2025, that he had issued on Feb. 6, 2025, which had precluded the U.S. Office of Personnel Management from closing the short opt-in time window under the OPM's "Deferred Resignation Program" offer. That offer had been sent to nearly all federal employees by email

on Jan. 28, 2025. The program, which had been set to close on Feb. 6, hours before the injunction was issued, allowed certain federal employees within the executive branch to resign their positions effective Sept. 30, 2025, but to cease active work and continue receiving pay and benefits until that date. Workers who opted in could even obtain work outside the federal government in the meantime. As soon as Judge

O'Toole lifted the injunction, the OPM closed the program to new entrants. A reported 75,000 federal employees have accepted the resignation offer. It is likely that at least some of them work in the EPA and that the 300-person departure number will increase further.

EPA has been conducting hazardous waste cleanup work under the direction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the

areas impacted by the Eaton and Palisades Fires. This work is referred to as Phase 1 removal. It involves EPA staff removing from the burn areas potentially dangerous everyday products and chemicals including paints, cleaning supplies, automotive fluids and oils, lawn products including herbicides and pesticides, batteries including standard and rechargeable types such as lithium-ion batteries, and pro-

pane tanks and other pressurized gas containers. After fires, these items require special handling procedures, especially if their containers are damaged.

Many homes in the burn areas have damaged or destroyed lithium-ion batteries, lithium-ion battery storage systems, and electric or hybrid vehicles containing batteries. The EPA has indicated that these batteries are dangerous because, even if they appear intact, they can spontaneously reignite, explode, and emit toxic gases and particulate matter even after fires are extinguished. EPA teams will also remove visible asbestos and items presumed to contain asbestos. In some cases, unsafe site conditions require the Phase 1 hazardous material removal to be deferred to Phase 2 debris removal.

This work is intended to do three things. First, it ensures the safety of residents, particularly as they return to their burned-down or fire-damaged homes to identify damage, locate items that may have survived the fires, and work with insurance adjusters and contractors to begin the insurance claim and rebuilding processes. Second, it protects the safety of other federal and private workers who will, after the hazardous material is removed, con-

duct Phase 2 debris removal of remaining materials in the burn footprints. Much of this Phase 2 debris removal work will be performed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Third, it is designed to prevent hazardous materials from being further released into the environment, such as through stormwater infiltration into soil and groundwater, runoff into surface water including rivers and creeks and the Pacific Ocean, and aerial re-entrainment through wind and debris removal work that can disturb the hazardous substance debris. EPA has performed this Phase 1 hazardous material removal work at no cost to residents.

A significant number of EPA staff members are involved in this debris removal work at a significant number of properties. The agency has indicated that, as of Feb. 17, it has had 1,601 people in the field as part of 121 teams including 88 hazardous material removal teams, 14 lithium-ion battery teams, and 19 reconnaissance/survey teams. These staff members have surveyed 12,024 properties, including 6,506 in the Eaton Fire area and 5,518 in the Palisades Fire area, and cleared 7,100 properties, 3,865 in the Eaton Fire area and 3,235 in the Palisades Fire area.

President Trump issued an Ex-

ecutive Order on Jan. 24, 2025, directing the EPA to complete this wildfire hazardous waste cleanup within 30 days. The work began on Jan. 28, 2025. About three weeks later, on Feb. 17, 2025, the EPA indicated it had already cleared or deferred to Phase 2 about 75% of the properties impacted by the fires.

This promising progress suggests recent staff cuts at EPA may not have immediately impacted hazardous substance removal from the areas impacted by the Eaton and Palisades Fires. However, continued attempts to dramatically cut the federal workforce across agencies have continued. There is concern that these past and future staff cuts will deter the EPA's ability to conduct this work as quickly in the future when wildfires strike again in California, as they almost certainly will.

In addition, there may be downstream effects to these staff cuts. Even after debris is cleared and areas are rebuilt, ongoing monitoring by federal and state environmental officials of air and water quality impaired by the fires may be impacted. Because much of environmental law is handled through cooperative federalism, in which states are deputized to implement federal law, staff cuts at EPA may impair the EPA's efforts to work with California en-

vironmental agencies in performing this work.

But, as with many of the cuts across the government being implemented by the Trump Administration, much remains to be seen, and impacts may not be fully realized for several years.

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