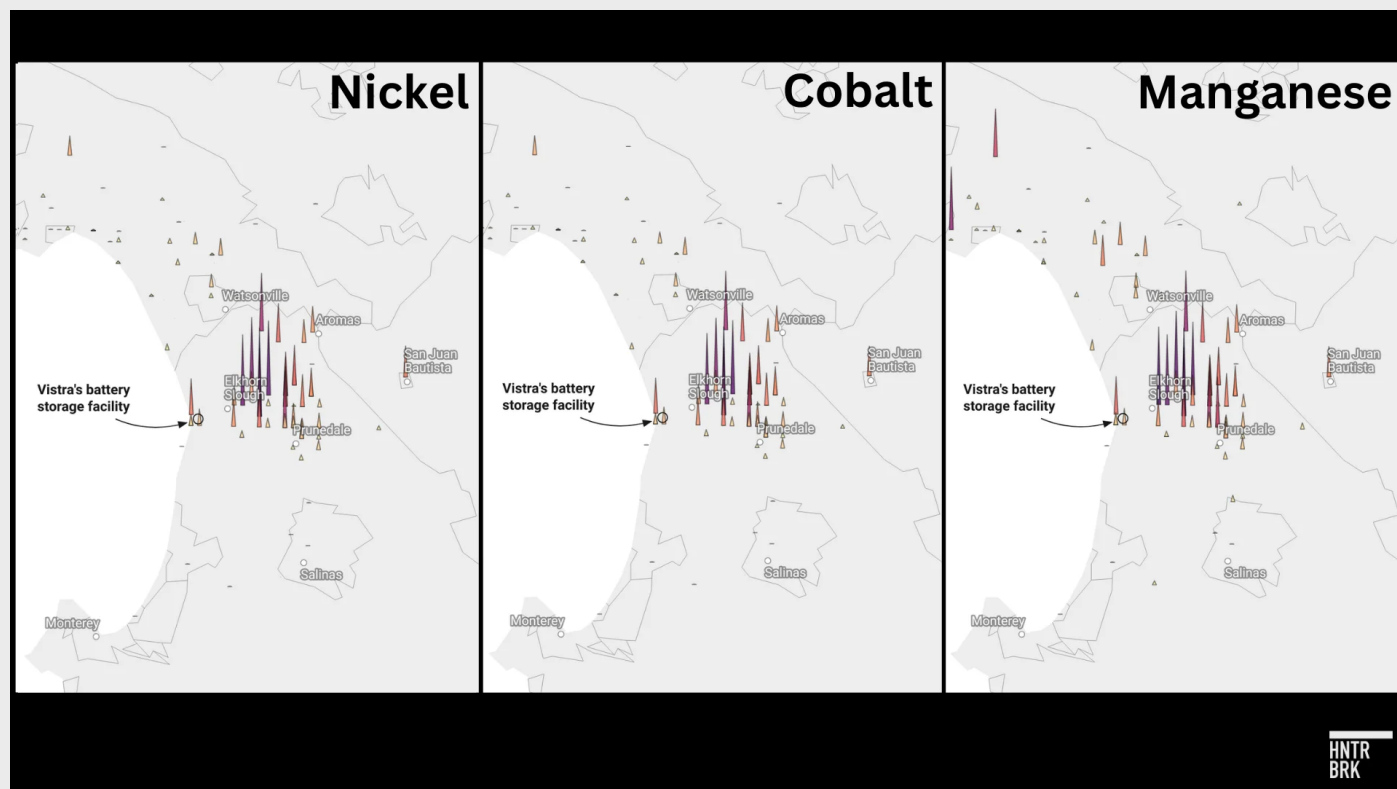


# BREAKING: NEW DATA INDICATES ELEVATED HEAVY METAL AFTER VISTRA FIRE



FEB 11, 2025 5:55 PM EST

BY: [Till Daldrup](#) [Ruth Dusseault](#) [Michelle Cera](#) [Bay City News](#)

EDITOR: [Sam Koppelman](#)

- Surface sample testing conducted by a grassroots community response group shows elevated heavy metal concentrations near Vistra Corp.'s (NYSE: \$VST) battery storage facility in Moss Landing, California, after a lithium-ion battery fire burned for several days.
- A Hunterbrook analysis of the testing data shows that samples taken within 20 miles of Vistra's Moss Landing facility on average have nickel and cobalt concentrations that are about 34 times higher than the levels found in samples collected further away from the plant.

University researchers [had already found](#) unusually high concentrations of nickel, manganese, and cobalt in marsh soil at a nearby estuary.

- Planning documents obtained by Hunterbrook via FOIA request show that the Monterey County Planning Commission waived a more thorough environmental review when it considered Vistra's application to build the Moss Landing battery energy storage facility in 2019.
- More than three weeks after the fire, residents are still reporting health issues, including headaches, respiratory issues, and fatigue.
- When asked about the community surface sample tests, Vistra did not respond. On its [incident response website](#), the company acknowledged the preliminary soil test results published by Monterey County, stating: "More sampling is needed to understand how the results compare to relevant screening levels."

Based on Hunterbrook Media's reporting, Hunterbrook Capital did not take any positions related to this article. Hunterbrook Media is in talks with litigation firms exploring a potential lawsuit based on our reporting. If you are a victim, we invite you to share your story by emailing [ideas@hntrbrk.com](mailto:ideas@hntrbrk.com) – where we source information for ongoing reporting.

MOSS LANDING, Calif. — "I have lithium in my blood," Heather Griffin's voice quivered as she spoke to supporters at a demonstration across from Vistra's battery storage facility in Monterey County, California, just weeks after a multiday fire at the plant. "I got tested because I had a metallic taste in my mouth and gums, soreness, and my teeth were sore even a week after the fire was put out."

Griffin is one of dozens of residents who have reported suffering from an illness following the flames, with symptoms including trouble breathing, painful sores, bloody noses, extreme fatigue, and persistent headaches.

On Saturday morning, members of the community organized a demonstration under the banner of a new grassroots group: Never Again Moss Landing. The group formed days after the Moss Landing battery energy storage facility fire, with the goal of advocating for community interests and organizing volunteer efforts to collect facts so that the January 16 fire, the second in three years after a fire at PG&E's battery facility [in 2022](#), is the last.

The group has also decided to supplement testing efforts by Monterey County and take matters into their own hands: On the weekend after the fire had apparently burned itself out, volunteers collected 124 surface wipe samples throughout the Monterey Bay area, swabbing everything from patio tables to solar panels to hot tub covers.



## **Data analysis reveals elevated heavy metal concentrations following path of plume**

The samples were shipped to an independent laboratory in Utah for analysis and the group shared the results with Monterey County, the California EPA, and journalists. It also intends to publish the raw data on its website.

A Hunterbrook analysis of the testing data shows that samples taken within 20 miles of Vistra's Moss Landing facility on average have nickel and cobalt concentrations that are about 34 times higher than the levels found in samples collected further away from the plant.





Source: BioMax Environmental / Surface sample tests conducted by local residents • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Several samples close to the facility showed elevated nickel and cobalt concentrations more than 180 times higher than the average levels more than 20



Manganese concentrations within the 20-mile radius are more than 12 times higher than outside. Lithium levels are three times higher.

**HUNTERBROOK**

SIGN UP



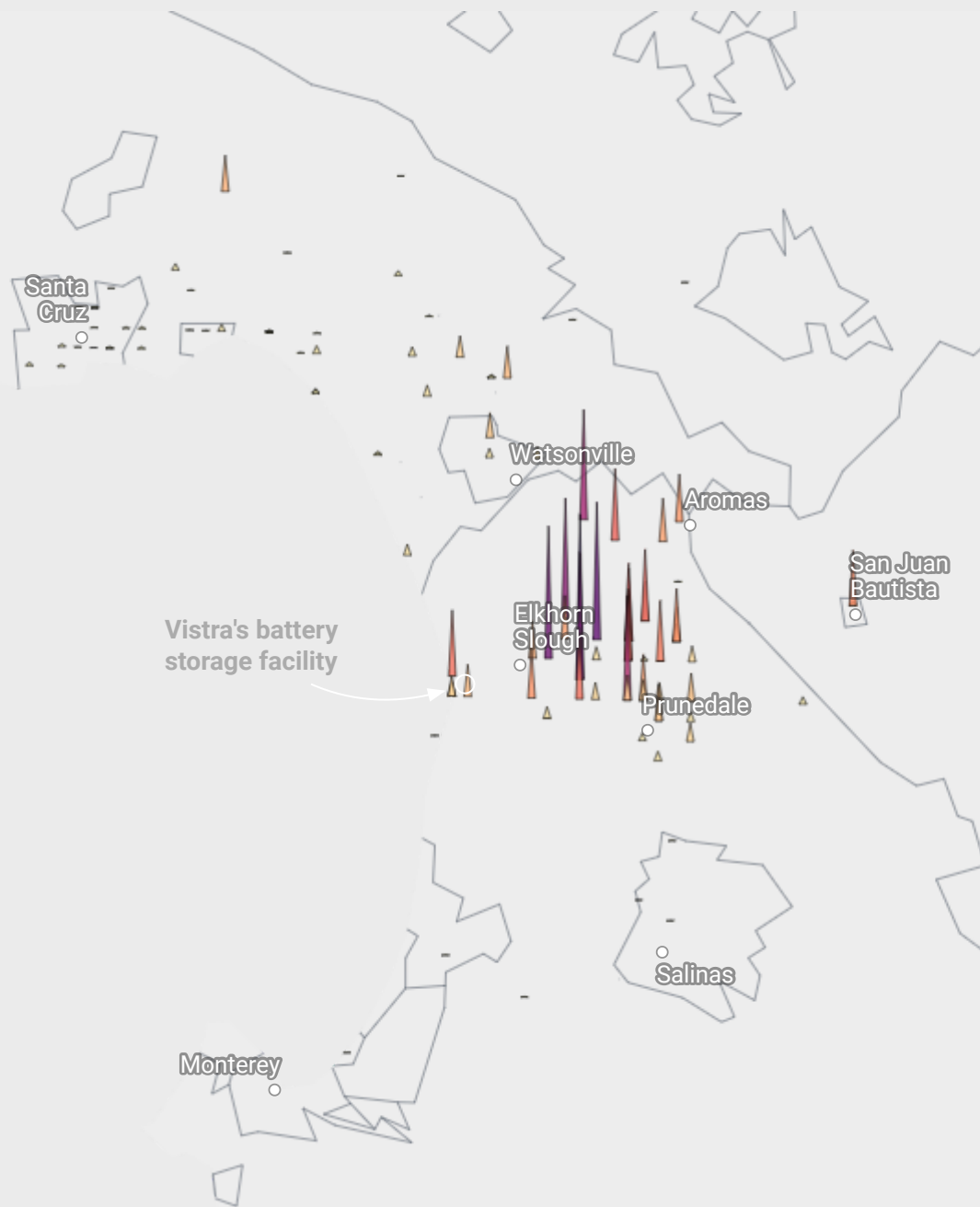
0.07

300

Cobalt  $\mu\text{g}/100\text{cm}^2$ 

200

100



Source: BioMax Environmental / Surface sample tests conducted by local residents • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Hunterbrook's data visualizations show that nickel, cobalt, and manganese levels are mostly elevated east and northeast of the Vistra facility, which matches plume

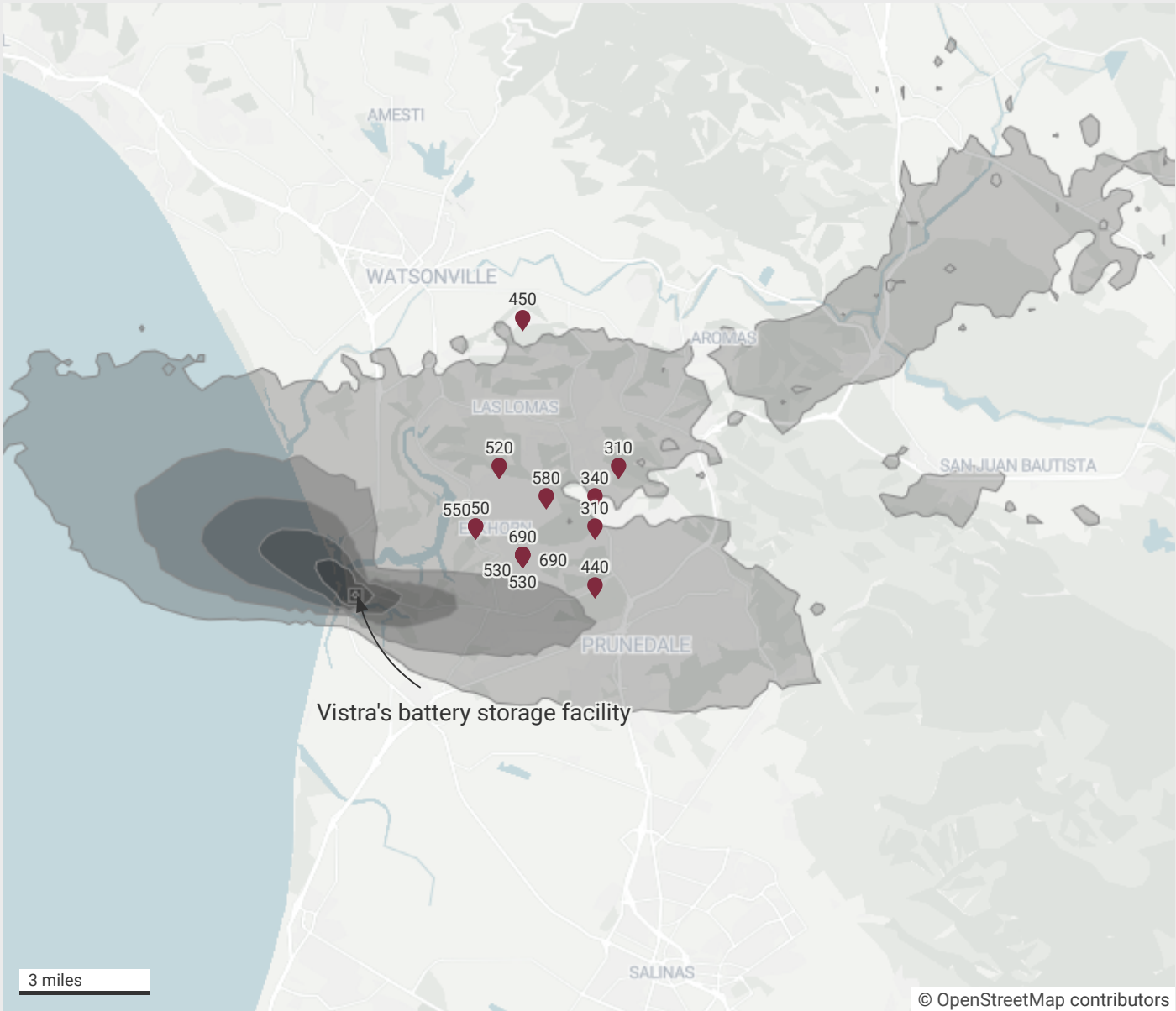
suggesting a connection between higher heavy metal concentrations and the fire.

## Highest Heavy Metal Concentrations

Measured in  $\mu\text{g}/100\text{cm}^2$

Click on the buttons below to switch between metals:

- Nickel
- Cobalt
- Manganese
- Lithium



Smoke plume model

Source: BioMax Environmental / Surface sample tests conducted by local residents | Peter Weiss-Penzias with NOAA HYSPLIT Dispersion Model • Created with [Datavrapper](#)



— were located in or in the direct vicinity of the model showing the smoke plume's extent about 24 hours after the fire started.

Roughly 25,000 people live in the area covered by the smoke plume model.

Trace elements such as [nickel](#) and [cobalt](#) occur naturally. Their compounds can be found in soil, plants, and animals. While [small amounts](#) of [cobalt](#) and certain other metals can be beneficial for humans and plants, high concentrations can become toxic. Long-term exposure may cause health problems and adversely affect [plant growth](#).

The samples in this community-organized test were collected with wipe sampling kits. While this data shows that surface levels of heavy metals are elevated closer to the Vistra facility, it is not easily comparable with heavy metal baseline data or EPA screening levels, according to Michael Polkabila, the industrial hygienist who conducted the surface sample tests for the Moss Landing community group.

“What we wanted to capture was what was the impact of the Vistra fire incident and what was coming out of that smoke plume and soil on surfaces,” he said. “We're looking at an increase as we get closer to the site.”

### **Community testing results build on data from county, university**

The County of Monterey conducted soil tests in collaboration with the California Department of Toxic Substances Control. [Preliminary results](#) were published on January 31.

Cobalt exceeded screening levels at all testing sites. One of the eight chosen testing sites [exceeded screening levels](#) for nickel, manganese, and copper, in addition to cobalt. It is located northeast of the Vistra facility, where the smoke plume moved. The County emphasized that the data has not been fully analyzed or validated and is not conclusive.

On its [incident response website](#), the company acknowledged the soil test results published by Monterey County, stating: “These are preliminary test results that are designed to determine areas that may benefit from additional study. More sampling is needed to understand how the results compare to relevant screening levels.”

Vistra also said that it is conducting its own soil sample tests with a third-party contractor. So far, however, Vistra does not appear to have published the results.

The community and county test results add to other scientific evidence suggesting that the fire at Vistra’s facility may have caused elevated heavy metal concentrations in the surrounding areas. After the fire, San José State University researchers [found](#) unusually high concentrations of nickel, manganese, and cobalt in marsh soil at a nearby estuary.



## Documents reveal Vistra avoided environmental review

Planning documents obtained by Hunterbrook show that the Monterey County Planning Commission waived a more thorough environmental review when it considered Vistra's application to build the Moss Landing battery storage facility in 2019, stating that there was "no substantial evidence that the proposed project as designed, conditioned and mitigated will have a significant effect on the environment."

In the [May 2019 meeting](#) commission meeting where it voted to waive the review, the commission did not discuss a fire at the Vistra facility and its potential environmental impact. The application included a fire safety plan, which the local North County Fire Protection District reviewed and deemed acceptable.

The plan at the time of the application did not account for a multiday fire at the facility. An [emergency response plan](#) from 2023 that Vistra posted on its incident response site assumed the "worst case" scenario to be a fire extinguished after 30 minutes.

Hunterbrook obtained a letter that the Monterey County Board of Supervisors sent to Vistra and PG&E, which operates an adjacent battery storage facility, in the aftermath of the January 16 fire. In the letter, the board requests that both companies develop emergency response plans that include a "catastrophic worst case scenario" defined as a "full conflagration" of the facilities.

"The approval of both Vistra and PG&E's battery facilities never received the fullest review and robust public discussion that they deserved," wrote Glenn Church, supervisor for Monterey County District 2, in [a blog post](#) about the Moss Landing fire. "They were promoted as a great step forward for our energy future. The downside was never properly vetted."



and vegetables, including broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, strawberries, tomatoes, grapes, and artichokes.

According to the Monterey County Farm Bureau's [2023 crop report](#), the region produces vegetables and fruits with a gross production value of about \$4.3 billion. Produce sourced from Salinas Valley is sold in grocery stores across the country.

Because it's winter, there were few crops in fields at the time of the fire, according to the Farm Bureau.

"[Agricultural] Associations are working to assess any impacts and ensure that crops, farmworkers, and consumers are safe," Norm Groot, the Farm Bureau's Executive Director, wrote in an email to Hunterbrook. "It should be noted that 'heavy metals' such as those involved in the emissions from this fire are elements commonly found as natural plant micronutrients. Experts do not anticipate significant plant uptake or toxicity concerns based on current soil pH levels and organic matter composition."

### **New regulations may follow the fire**

Rules for approving battery storage facilities may become stricter in California in reaction to the fire.

California Assemblymember Dawn Addis [introduced a bill](#) that would return approval authority over battery energy storage facilities back to local communities, closing an [authorization bypass](#) through California's Energy Commission. It would also require facilities to be built at least 3,200 feet away from homes, schools, and hospitals.

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) also [proposed new safety standards](#) for battery facilities that would "increase oversight over emergency response action plans" and establish "technical logbook standards." The proposal will be voted on at a CPUC meeting on March 13. The CPUC's Safety and Enforcement



## Residents say they continue to suffer

More than three weeks after the fire, local residents told Hunterbrook they are still experiencing health issues. And many of them are frustrated with Vistra's and county officials' responses.

The Monterey County Department of Health said that as of January 31, it had received 27 reports from people concerned about their health and the Vistra power storage facility fire. The most common symptoms reported included “eye, nose, and throat irritation; metallic taste or smell; and exacerbation of chronic respiratory problems like asthma.”

Marcy Castro had a bad feeling when her daughter returned to elementary school, three days after the fire apparently had burned itself out.

They both had experienced intense headaches and fatigue during and after the fire, and the school is only five miles from the facility. She asked the school's office staff and the principal about possible health impacts from the fire and protocols for cleaning the playground from debris that may have traveled from the burning battery facility. “Clueless’ I guess is a good word,” she said. “They're all kind of clueless about what should be done.”

When she picked her daughter up from school, she noticed a peculiar — but somewhat familiar — taste.

“I notice that for a few hours afterwards I'm having that weird taste on the tip of my tongue like I've been testing batteries all day,” she says. “Like you know we were kids and you tested the square batteries and you'd have that weird taste and feeling on the tip of your tongue. I get that when I go over there.”

After she heard that her daughter's class was running laps outside in gym class, she decided to keep her home, fearing exposure to the air near the facility could impact

Like many of the residents Hunterbrook spoke with, Sherry Okamoto has been navigating persisting symptoms in the aftermath of the fire. What began as headaches turned into a hard time breathing, nausea, wheezing, and rashes. Okamoto, who said she struggles with autoimmune disorders, has relied on respiratory support since the fire.

“When things hit me, it hits me hard,” she said, and added, “I’m lucky I have my breathing machines.”

Her two-year-old granddaughter has also experienced respiratory issues since the fire. One of her chickens died, her cats and dog have been wheezing, and her duck pool is covered in an oily film. She is concerned her homegrown produce and eggs might be contaminated.

“I’m not going to give it to my kids,” she said. So she pulled up her whole garden.

Okamoto feels left behind. “Nobody will answer us,” she lamented after detailing a lack of support and information from Vistra and the state government.

Stephanie, who is using a pseudonym because she doesn't want her name published, is in a similarly difficult position. The sole caretaker for her 77-year-old husband, who has Parkinson's, her past few weeks have been marked by extreme anxiety and stress. “I’ve never been this scared in my life,” she said. “My husband doesn’t breathe well. He has a compromised system ... I worry about him.”

Stephanie told Hunterbrook she and her husband never got evacuation warnings or information about air contamination. “No one was looking out for us,” she said. And when the EPA released [a statement](#) informing residents that the air posed no risk to public health, Stephanie mentioned she did not believe it. “We feel that we were ignored.”

Shiree Ames Goins and her husband were living about seven miles from the Vistra plant at the time of the fire. She described a series of cascading symptoms that first

After speaking on the phone with her doctor, she and her husband knew they had to leave the area. She told Hunterbrook they rented an Airbnb north of their home for about two weeks. While their symptoms persisted because the plume from the fire had also traveled north, they found that their symptoms became less intense the farther they got from home.

When they returned to their home, her symptoms came back. She now worries her home will not be livable, and she will be unable to sell it to someone else in good conscience. “We could end up being homeless.”

“We’re going into the third week,” Goins said, “and everybody’s still living here amongst this toxic, invisible, possibly carcinogenic material.”

And she said she has had very little guidance or support from elected officials or Vistra: “I would have never dreamt in Monterey County that this would not only happen but have such an underwhelming response.”



“The doctors and the labs don't know what to do,” said Brian Roeder, a community facilitator for Never Again Moss Landing. Roeder said he spent \$2,700 of his own money to help pay for the volunteer’s test kits.

Jill Amos, whose work as a realtor requires her to be outside a lot, has struggled to get heavy metals blood testing done with her doctor. “No one is prepared, not even our medical facilities,” she told Hunterbrook.

Goins also had difficulty getting heavy metals testing done, and she recalled her doctor telling her that her symptoms might be from anxiety. “You have to prove to people that you’re sick. They think it’s in your head.”

“I think they're waiting for Sacramento,” Roeder told Hunterbrook, referring to the county’s hesitance to take big action on public health. “The cavalry is not coming. Look, guys, you need to tell the labs and the doctors: A) People are going to come in. B) Something did happen. This is a test they need. This is how they can get it, right. And we'd like to know the results. And none of that's happened because I think they're expecting the feds and the state to come in and do that. And they haven't. The EPA left, and that was it. The fire is out. We're gone. Nothing happened. Nothing to see.”

## Authors

**Till Daldrup** joined Hunterbrook from The Wall Street Journal, where he focused on open-source investigations and content verification. In 2023, he was part of a team of reporters who won a Gerald Loeb Award for an investigation that revealed how Russia is stealing grain from occupied parts of Ukraine. He has an M.A. in Journalism from New York University and a B.S. in Social Sciences from University of Cologne. He’s also an alum of the Cologne School of Journalism (Kölner Journalistenschule). Till is based in New York.



Conveyance Tunnel, agricultural engineering in the corn belt and hyper local rights of nature laws in rural America. Her position at Bay City News is supported by the California Local News Fellowship, a statewide initiative spearheaded by UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.

**Michelle Cera** is a sociologist specializing in digital ethnography and pedagogy. She is a Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology from New York University, building on her Bachelor of Arts degree with Highest Honors from the University of California, Berkeley. Currently serving as a Workshop Coordinator at NYU's Anthropology and Sociology Departments, Michelle fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and advances innovative research methodologies.

## Editor

**Sam Koppelman** is a New York Times best-selling author who has written books with former United States Attorney General Eric Holder and former United States Acting Solicitor General Neal Katyal. Sam has published in the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Time Magazine, and other outlets — and occasionally volunteers on a fire speech for a good cause. He has a BA in Government from Harvard, where he was named a John Harvard Scholar and wrote op-eds like “Shut Down Harvard Football,” which he tells us were great for his social life. Sam is based in New York.

---

Hunterbrook Media publishes investigative and global reporting — with no ads or paywalls. When articles do not include Material Non-Public Information (MNPI), or “insider info,” they may be provided to our affiliate Hunterbrook Capital, an

Please contact [ideas@hntrbrk.com](mailto:ideas@hntrbrk.com) to share ideas, [talent@hntrbrk.com](mailto:talent@hntrbrk.com) for work opportunities, and [press@hntrbrk.com](mailto:press@hntrbrk.com) for media inquiries.

#### LEGAL DISCLAIMER

© 2025 by Hunterbrook Media LLC. When using this website, you acknowledge and accept that such usage is solely at your own discretion and risk. Hunterbrook Media LLC, along with any associated entities, shall not be held responsible for any direct or indirect damages resulting from the use of information provided in any Hunterbrook publications. It is crucial for you to conduct your own research and seek advice from qualified financial, legal, and tax professionals before making any investment decisions based on information obtained from Hunterbrook Media LLC. The content provided by Hunterbrook Media LLC does not constitute an offer to sell, nor a solicitation of an offer to purchase any securities. Furthermore, no securities shall be offered or sold in any jurisdiction where such activities would be contrary to the local securities laws.

Hunterbrook Media LLC is not a registered investment advisor in the United States or any other jurisdiction. We strive to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information provided, drawing on sources believed to be trustworthy. Nevertheless, this information is provided "as is" without any guarantee of accuracy, timeliness, completeness, or usefulness for any particular purpose. Hunterbrook Media LLC does not guarantee the results obtained from the use of this information. All information presented are opinions based on our analyses and are subject to change without notice, and there is no commitment from Hunterbrook Media LLC to revise or update any information or opinions contained in any report or publication contained on this website. The above content, including all information and opinions presented, is intended solely for educational and information purposes only. Hunterbrook Media LLC authorizes the redistribution of these materials, in whole or in part, provided that such redistribution is for non-commercial, informational purposes only. Redistribution must include this notice and must not alter the materials. Any commercial use, alteration, or other forms of misuse of these materials are strictly prohibited without the express written approval of Hunterbrook Media LLC. Unauthorized use, alteration, or misuse of these materials may result in legal action to enforce our rights, including but not limited to seeking injunctive relief, damages, and any other remedies available under the law.



## DISCLOSURES

© 2025 by Hunterbrook Media LLC. All rights are reserved. Use of this website is strictly governed by our Terms of Use. The content herein is furnished to users on an "AS IS" basis without any form of express or implied warranty. For detailed information regarding the handling of user privacy, please refer to our Privacy Policy.

This website may feature forward-looking statements reflecting Hunterbrook Media's current perspectives concerning, inter alia, its operational and investment strategies. Such statements, identifiable by terms including but not limited to "anticipate," "believe," "estimate," "expect," "intend," "may," "plan," "predict," "should," and "will," are inherently speculative and subject to various risks and uncertainties. Consequently, actual results or outcomes may substantially deviate from those projected in these statements. Hunterbrook Media expressly disclaims any obligation to update or revise any forward-looking statements, irrespective of subsequent developments or new information.

We use this platform to share our opinions, research, and any related investment positions held by Hunterbrook Media's affiliates. Positions may change at any time. Descriptions of any investment methodologies and strategies of Hunterbrook Media or its affiliates are indicative and subject to modification at Hunterbrook Media's discretion. Use of Hunterbrook Media's research is entirely at the user's risk. Users shall not use this site for any illegal or prohibited purposes and comply with all relevant local, state, national, and international laws and regulations in their use of this site.

The information presented is current as of the date indicated. No representation regarding the completeness or timeliness of this information is made. This information should not be construed as investment advice or a recommendation of any kind. Some information is sourced from third parties and, while deemed reliable, has not been independently verified, and its accuracy or completeness is not guaranteed. Hunterbrook Media is not affiliated with any sites linked to this website.

This site does not constitute an offer or solicitation to purchase or sell services. Investment in securities and other financial instruments inherently involves significant risk, including the potential loss of principal. Users are advised to undertake their own due diligence and consult professional advisors before engaging in any investment activity. All users and each potential investor must independently evaluate the suitability of any investment opportunity in light of their specific objectives and circumstances, considering both the potential risks and benefits.

By accessing this site, users acknowledge that Hunterbrook Media, potentially in conjunction with Hunterbrook Media's affiliates, may hold positions in securities mentioned herein, potentially yielding significant gains from stock price fluctuations post-publication. Hunterbrook Media reserves the right to transact in these securities post-publication, adopting positions which may be long, short, or neutral, irrespective of initial reporting on positions.

Should any provision of these Terms of Use be adjudged invalid or unenforceable, the remaining provisions shall remain in full force and effect. Third-party site link trademarks belonging to their respective owners. Hunterbrook

