



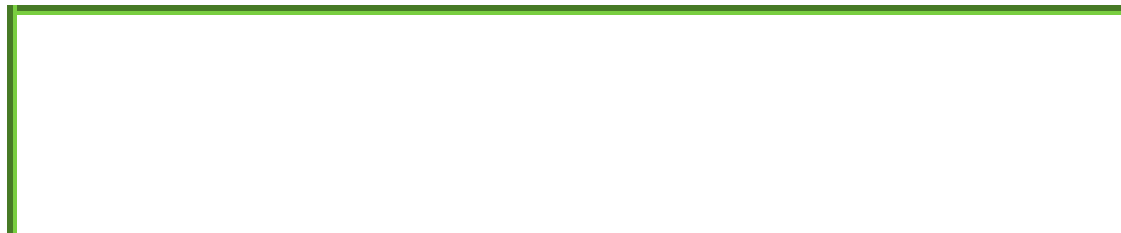
***Protecting our rural environment by promoting citizen
participation in sustainable land use planning since 2006***

The Community Action Project (CAP) administers the Calaveras Planning Coalition (CPC), which is comprised of regional and local organizations, community groups, and concerned individuals who promote public participation in land use and resource planning to ensure a healthy human, natural, and economic environment now and in the future.

Learn more at www.calaverascap.com

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Join Us!

Get a glimpse into what CPC membership is like by attending a meeting. There is no commitment, just show up and listen in!

Next Calaveras Planning Coalition Meeting

August 2, 2021 3 P.M. - 5 P.M.

New Members Welcome at CPC Meetings

Organizations, groups, and individuals (known as associate members) may join the Calaveras Planning Coalition (CPC). Prospective members may attend two consecutive meetings before making a final decision on membership in the Coalition. The membership form is a pledge to support and advocate for the Coalition's eleven Land Use and Development Principles, which you will find on our website:

www.calaverascap.com.

There is no membership fee. However, members are encouraged to donate to the Community Action Project/Calaveras Planning Coalition. Visitors and prospective members will, by necessity, be excluded from attorney/client privileged discussions.

If you are interested in membership, please email CPC Facilitator Tom Infusino, tomi@volcano.net, to receive a membership form, agenda, and the Zoom meeting connection.

To help prevent the spread of Covid-19 in our county, all CAP and CPC meetings will be held online via Zoom until restrictions are lifted by the Public Health Department.

BOS Special Meeting Tuesday, July 27, 2021

Agenda Upcoming

Planning Commission Meeting August 12, 2021

Agenda Upcoming

Local News

Drought 2021 - How Bad Is It? - Part II

Jan Hovey / Valley Springs News / July 9, 2021

Gov. Gavin Newsom on May 10, 2021, declared a drought emergency for most counties in California, including Calaveras County. The News asked the Calaveras County Water District to give some insight on the conditions in Calaveras and what we can expect this summer.

"Most of the reservoirs in Calaveras County are currently well below average for this time of year," said Jessica Self, external affairs manager for CCWD. "As of June 15, the State Water resources Control Board issued notices to all post-1914 water right holders in California informing them water is unavailable under those water rights."

"CCWD is fortunate in that most of our water rights are backed up by storage, but the notice of unavailability was certainly a sign that this is a severe drought and we can expect conservation mandates from the state at some point," she added. "As for current water conditions in Calaveras County, CCWD has a water data packet that is updated daily with all the latest precipitation amounts, average river flows and reservoir levels. You can download the water data packets at www.ccwd.org/water-resources/public-data-packet/.

"Calaveras County only reached 55 to 60 percent of long-term precipitation and snowpack estimates this year," said Self. "Please see the most recent water data packet for more precise information."

As for possible water conservation mandates, Self said, "No conservation mandates are being enacted at this time, but CCWD is encouraging customers to conserve water and prepare for extended dry conditions. CCWD is actively partnering with local and statewide entities to promote water conservation given the current drought conditions. This includes partnering with water agencies in the county as we relaunch our Calaveras Conserves partnership program for the current drought. The Calaveras County community will start seeing water conservation outreach efforts on behalf of CCWD and Calaveras Conserves."

"We encourage customers to visit our website at www.ccwd.org which includes recommendations on how our customers can save water both indoors and outdoors," Self added. "In addition, we highly recommend anyone who is interested in ideas on how to conserve water to visit www.saveourwater.com. Save Our Water is a water conservation program created by the Association of California Water Agencies and the California Department of Water Resources. Their site provides numerous useful tips and aims to help Californians make water conservation a daily habit."

For more information, contact the Calaveras County Water District at (209) 754-3543.

Real estate boom exacerbates affordable housing shortage in Calaveras County

Noah Berner / Calaveras Enterprise / July 20, 2021

With the rise in home prices since March of 2020, locals are finding it increasingly difficult to find housing.

The shortage of affordable housing is nothing new in Calaveras County or the state, but the real estate boom during the pandemic has exacerbated the problem.

From February of 2020 to June of 2021, the median sales price of single-family homes in the county increased by 37% from \$355,000 to \$488,000, according to data from the California Association of Realtors.

During the same period, the unsold inventory index, which estimates the length of time it would take to sell all homes currently listed at current sales rates, decreased from 5.7 months to 2.1 months. In December of 2020, the unsold inventory index reached 1.5 months.

Barry Ward, owner of Barry Ward Realty in Arnold, said that he has never seen inventory so low or overbids so high in his 45 years of working in the county's real estate market.

"Back in previous markets an overbid on a \$250,000 or \$300,000 house might have been \$25,000 or \$30,000 tops," he said. "Some of these homes now, we list them for \$350,000 and we sell them \$100,000 higher."

Ward said that he expected the real estate market to slow down as the novel coronavirus spread and businesses closed last year, but the opposite proved to be the case.

"I kind of realized that these people can't get on planes, they can't get on cruise ships, they have to be at a place that they can drive to, and even though they had stay-at-home orders, they still wanted to come up here," he said. "Prior to COVID, we were at '04 prices. ... Now, we are already up past our peaks before the Great Recession by a good 15% or 20%."

It took the local real estate market more time than other areas to rebound from the economic crisis in the late 2000s, Ward said.

"For whatever reason, we were just kind of flat here," he said. "COVID was the catalyst, and what happened last year and now should have probably happened five years ago. I've been through four recessions in the last 45 years, and usually we play catch up faster than we did this time."

Ward said that buyers primarily from the Bay Area with higher incomes have been competing with each other over homes, with some properties receiving as many as 15 offers.

"We get retirees from both the Bay Area and the Valley—people selling their homes and moving up here full time," he said. "We're getting families that are able to work remotely now, so they decided it was a good time to come up and either have their kids go to our schools or do Zoom schooling, and

then work here and be up here four days a week—we've seen a lot of that. And then just the ones that want a weekend getaway."

Purchasing a home in Calaveras County is still a good deal for buyers from the Bay Area, Ward said.

"We're a lot cheaper up here even though we've gone way up, compared to Tahoe and other areas," he said.

While property owners are seeing their home values rise, the increase in demand has had some unfortunate consequences for local residents, Ward said.

"If they were renting and trying to buy, some of them are priced out of the market, and you need a place for your locals to live," he said. "That's the unfortunate fallout."

The availability of long-term rentals has declined and rents have been on the rise, Ward said.

"It's tough to find a rental anywhere," he said. "In a lot of cases, when there's an opportunity to raise the rents, they raise the rents way up because of demand."

The increase in short-term rentals in recent years, especially in the Arnold area, has also taken a toll on housing availability, Ward said.

"I think owners say, 'I can make a lot more as an Airbnb—why should I rent it full time?'" he said. "It takes that property off the market for a local person that could live there."

In July of 2017, Airbnb began collecting and remitting transient occupancy tax (TOT) payments directly to the county on behalf of its hosts.

The amount of revenue collected by the county from Airbnbs went from \$68,000 in 2017, to \$232,000 in 2018, to \$612,000 in 2019, to \$733,000 in 2020, according to data from the tax collector's office. Part of the reason for the increase was the rise in TOT from 6% to 12% at the end of 2018. The revenue is placed in the general fund, and currently provides funds for the sheriff's office, public works, fire districts and the visitor's bureau.

Short-term rentals play an important role in the local economy, especially in an area with limited hotel rooms, Ward said.

"The increased population here does benefit the market, the restaurants, the stores," he said. "I think that is your lodging, because when you look at the size of Meadowmont Lodge or Timberline Lodge, there's not enough there to put a dent in anything, so you have to have these cabins to support the people that want to visit."

Although the county is in need of more housing, cost is often a prohibitive factor in new home construction. Ward said that while the cost to build a new home is around \$350 per square foot, home sale prices usually range from \$250 to \$325 per square foot.

"You can buy existing homes way below replacement cost," he said. "But what I'm starting to see now, is our prices have gone up to the point where we're getting closer to replacement costs, which will encourage building."

District 3 Supervisor Merita Callaway said that she frequently hears from locals who are having a difficult time finding housing.

"Talking to other counties, it's the same scenario with (the real estate boom) really hurting the long-term rental market," she said. "Especially here in Ebbetts Pass, there are also a whole lot of short-term rentals, and that's also hurting the long-term rental market."

Callaway said that she also hears from locals that out-of-towners are buying up long-term rentals and converting them to Airbnbs. While some have called on the county to limit short-term rentals, most of the concerns she hears have to do with impacts on neighborhoods like increased noise and traffic.

"I know some people are saying the board should put a limitation on short-term rentals, but it's hard for me to tell you you can't do something with your property if you're allowed to do it," she said. "The other question I'd ask is how are we going to enforce it?"

Callaway pointed out that formalized homeowner's associations (HOAs) have the ability to limit or ban short-term rentals, and that restricting them does not necessarily mean they would be available for long-term rentals, especially in a booming real estate market.

"Even if you put a cap on it, which the subdivision could do if they choose, that doesn't mean that they'd be available, because property owners might want to come up and use it for the holidays or ski season or what have you," she said. "It's a difficult situation almost everywhere."

Karen Munoz, of Arnold, is one one many locals who have had difficulty securing housing in recent years. Beginning last year, she spent eight months looking for a rental, staying at a friend's cabin while she searched.

While she finally found a rental and secured a one-year lease, she was notified by the owner in June that they wanted to sell.

"They wanted to sell because the market is so hot right now," Munoz said. "So, I was out looking for a place again."

With next to nothing available on the market, especially a place that would allow her to have a dog, Munoz approached a family friend about renting their Airbnb. The owner was making \$2,000 a month renting out the property, which was out of her price range.

Luckily, the owner agreed to rent the house to Munoz full time, while continuing to rent out the upper portion on occasion to make up for lost income.

"Two weekends a month they rent out the top portion," she said. "I pay \$1,200, and then they make up that \$800 in the rent each month."

Munoz said that she knows other locals who are having a difficult time in the rental market, and she's grateful to have a place.

"It's kind of a different situation, but I had no choice," she said. "It's impossible to find rentals here. There's people from the Bay Area that are buying up these cabins for ridiculous amounts, and then they want to turn them into Airbnbs. They want \$3,000 to \$4,000 a month, and it's just impossible for us residents who live here and try to work to find housing. It's just not around."

For the past two years, Munoz has made a living cleaning vacation rentals, mostly Airbnbs, in the Arnold area. She said she has seen a rise in the number of short-term rentals in the town recently.

"I have so much work, I can barely keep up, and I rarely have a day off," she said. "That's a good thing, but you have to have a place to live with all this work."

While Munoz would like to purchase a home, right now she is priced out of the market.

"It's impossible to buy something unless you are a millionaire," she said. "It's got to crash at some point, and then I've got to jump on it when that happens."

Munoz was ultimately able to find housing in a difficult market, but that hasn't been the case for everyone.

Calaveras County's latest point-in-time count in 2019 identified 186 individuals experiencing homelessness in the county, which was an 81% increase from the prior year.

The Angels Camp-based nonprofit Sierra Hope offers multiple programs for county residents experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Sierra Hope Executive Director Jerry Cadotte said that requests for services have increased over the past year.

"There's always been a lot of need, but I think with the pandemic certainly that there have been increases," he said. "We're hearing from people who say that the place they've been renting has been sold, and they've been given a 60-day notice to vacate. ... They may have been there for years, and it's been sold so they are having to find another place and not able to find something."

Cadotte said that the state's eviction moratorium during the pandemic has led to less turnover in long-term rentals, which has also had an impact on the availability of rentals for those who are looking.

Among its programs, Sierra Hope offers a rapid rehousing program for those experiencing homelessness.

"It's for people who are homeless, to assist them in getting into permanent housing, and we can pay deposits and provide some rental subsidies and case management to help them get back on their feet," he said. "We have some good funding for that, but people aren't able to find places to rent."

While 29 households were enrolled in the program in 2020, only 16 of them found housing, Cadotte said.

Sierra Hope's permanent supportive housing program offers housing and case management for those that are experiencing homelessness and unable to afford housing because of a physical or mental disability. The original grant for the program allowed Sierra Hope to lease six apartments.

"At one time we had four here in Calaveras County and two in Sonora," Cadotte said. "We have lost some of those units, and because of the tight rental market, we weren't able to find replacements for them. Eventually, because we weren't able to find replacements for some of the apartments that we lost, our grant was reduced, and now the grant provides for four units. We have three here in Calaveras County, and we still have one in Sonora."

Cadotte said many factors besides the eviction moratorium have contributed to the limited rental market.

"I've heard a lot of houses that were available for rent are being sold," he said. "We've got another real estate boom going on, and people are coming in and looking at places to rent and making offers

to buy them, or owners are deciding that now's a good time to sell, and so they're selling those homes rather than renting them out. We also see a lot of rentals becoming vacation rentals rather than rentals available for permanent housing. All of this has made an already difficult rental market even worse."

Sierra Hope is a local partner for the state's emergency rent relief program—CA COVID-19 Rent Relief—which offers funds for renters behind on their rent due to COVID-19 and landlords who have lost income during the pandemic.

"They can qualify for back rental payments all the way to March of 2020," Cadotte said. "If a tenant applies for that, an email is sent to the landlord and they can submit a corresponding application. It's a great program for landlords, because a lot of them are hurting. Originally, it was paying only 80% of the back rent that was due, but they've just changed that and are actually paying 100% of the rent that is due."

Those interested in learning more about the program can visit housingiskey.com or call (833) 430-2122. Sierra Hope has also hired an outreach worker to promote the program and assist people in filling out the online application.

"There was over \$3 million allocated just for Calaveras County to help tenants and landlords here," Cadotte said. "The sooner people get in the better chance that they're going to have of getting the help they need."

For those experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness, contacting county health and human services or Sierra Hope and completing an intake is a good place to start, Cadotte said.

"Unfortunately, a lot of people are in dire need and they're looking for housing now, and generally the answer is, 'No, I'm sorry, but we just don't have the resources.' We don't have an emergency shelter in Calaveras County. We have money to help people to get into housing, but the housing itself just isn't there."

Cadotte said that many barriers contribute to the lack of development of affordable housing in Calaveras County.

"There needs to be developers willing to come here and develop, there needs to be community support to accept them, and political support," he said. "I think all of those right now are obstacles."

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines a household as cost-burdened, meaning that it may have trouble affording basic necessities, if it spends more than 30% of its income on housing.

In Calaveras County, about 47% of homeowners with a mortgage spend more than 30% of their income on housing, according to 2019 estimates from the census bureau. For homeowners without a mortgage, the number is about 17%.

Almost half of renters in Calaveras County pay 35% or more of their income on housing, according to the 2019 census bureau estimates.

The state requires counties to adequately plan to meet existing and projected housing needs across all economic segments of the community. As part of this, counties are required to adopt housing elements in their general plans to identify housing needs, set goals and objectives to meet those needs, and define policies and programs to achieve their goals and objectives.

In order to meet existing and projected needs, 1,340 units would have to be built in the county between 2019 and 2027, according to the county's current housing element, which was adopted in 2019.

At the end of 2019, the county hired Lee Kimball as housing and community programs manager for health and human services, a new position created to address housing issues in a more efficient and integrated way.

For the past year and a half, Kimball has been studying data, identifying needs and funding sources, and working towards solutions for Calaveras County.

Some important factors in Calaveras County when it comes to housing are the disproportionate number of vacant homes, the large senior population, large amounts of land and difficulties with attracting for-profit developers, Kimball said.

"We are disproportionately high in empty houses," she said. "We have a much larger number of people here who own homes rather than rent homes, but we still don't have enough rental property, when you only have 2% of your houses available for rent."

About 40% of Calaveras County's roughly 28,000 housing units are vacant, meaning that they do not serve as a primary residence, according to a 2019 estimate from the census bureau. Of occupied housing units, about 78% are owner-occupied, while about 22% are renter-occupied.

For-profit developers can make more profit elsewhere and have little incentive to build in the county, Kimball said.

"Calaveras County, much like most rural communities, has a very, very tough time attracting for-profit developers," she said. "And then you add to it that California has put on a multitude of layers on zoning, and codes, and ordinances—and there's more coming for wildfire safety—that make it more expensive to build."

In recent years, the county has amended ordinances and offered other incentives to encourage development, with little success.

"We're looking at our ordinances," Kimball said. "We're looking at funding and strategies that will incrementally, piece by piece, change this up."

The state's funding opportunities are often geared towards urban areas, and finding a way to expand housing in Calaveras County will require creative solutions, Kimball said.

Kimball sees the building of accessory-dwelling units (ADUs)—separate housing units on the same land as a detached house—as part of the solution for the county.

In recent years, the state has passed laws to encourage the building of ADUs, some of which restrict local governments and HOAs from disallowing homeowners to build ADUs on their properties as long as they are compliant with setback requirements and other regulations.

“If you have everything on there that’s OK to go, the county can’t zone against it and a neighborhood can’t prohibit it,” Kimball said.

Building ADUs would not only increase housing stock, it could provide a passive income for seniors with limited financial resources, Kimball said. It could also provide a place for seniors to live on the properties of family members.

About 28% of county residents are 65 or older, according to a 2019 census bureau estimate, and many are on fixed incomes.

The county recently secured funding from the California Department of Housing and Community Development for a new program to assist county residents in building ADUs.

“We came up with a regional project that is kind of an innovative, rural model, of addressing housing shortages,” Kimball said. “We are going to be working to create supportive information and technical assistance for families who would like to put a second home on their property, including how to finance them, what is the process, and what are some questions to ask a contractor and engineer if you have to do site preparation.”

The program is a joint project between Calaveras, Amador, Nevada and Mariposa counties, and the partnership has allowed the four small counties to pool their resources, Kimball said. Calaveras County’s portion of the funding is about \$200,000.

“We’ll have a website at the end of the year where people can punch in, and they can get little by little the information they need, and a person who could help them understand the process to explore whether they would like to add a second home on their property,” Kimball said. “Even if we only do five to 12 of these a year over five years, it’s the same as if we were able to attract two apartment complexes. And quite honestly, Calaveras is beautiful, and I think building it this way will preserve the beauty of the neighborhoods in the remote areas instead of making it urbanized.”

Kimball is also looking at investment housing and its impact on the community.

“These are not residents of our community, but they are landowners in our community,” she said. “Could we find landlord incentives that would provide a means for some of these homes to become rentals?”

Lack of affordable housing is a challenge across the county, the state and the country, Kimball said, and Calaveras County will have to find creative solutions to address the problem.

“We need folks out there designing programs that fit rural communities—we’re not underdeveloped and going to grow up to become Los Angeles,” she said. “We can design programs that really fit us better, and then we can go out, and keep our fingers crossed, and work very hard, and hope to get a solution.”

Funding Opportunities Newsletter for July/August



This is an electronic newsletter published every two months containing information on upcoming grant and funding opportunities for the Sierra Nevada region. The newsletter includes federal, state, and private foundation funders as well as additional resources and information related to grant funding. The Sierra Nevada Conservancy provides the Funding Opportunities Newsletter as a free resource under its Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program.

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Regional News

PG&E Will Bury 10,000 Miles of Power Lines So They Don't Spark Wildfires

AP / NPR / July 21, 2021

SAN RAMON, Calif. — Pacific Gas & Electric plans to bury 10,000 miles of its power lines in an effort to prevent its fraying grid from sparking wildfires when electrical equipment collides with millions of trees and other vegetation across drought-stricken California.

The daunting project announced Wednesday aims to bury about 10% of PG&E's distribution and transmission lines at a projected cost of \$15 billion to as much as \$30 billion, based on how much the process currently costs. The utility believes it will find ways to keep the final bill at the lower end of

those estimates. Most of the costs will likely be shouldered by PG&E customers, whose electricity rates are already among the highest in the U.S.

PG&E stepped up its safety commitment just days after informing regulators a 70-foot pine tree that toppled on one of its power lines ignited a major fire in Butte County, the same rural area about 145 miles northeast of San Francisco where another fire sparked by its equipment in 2018 killed more than 80 people and destroyed thousands of homes.

Since it started July 13 in a remote area of Butte County, the Dixie Fire has churned northeast through the Sierra Nevada. By Wednesday, the fire spanned a 133-square-mile area, forcing the Plumas County sheriff on Wednesday to order evacuations along the west shore of popular Lake Almanor.

The backlash to PG&E's potential liability for the Dixie Fire prompted the company's recently hired CEO, Patricia "Patti" Poppe, to unveil the plan for underground lines several months earlier than she said she planned.

Previous PG&E regimes have staunchly resisted plans to bury long stretches of power lines because of the massive expense involved.

But Poppe told reporters on Wednesday that she quickly realized after she joined PG&E in January that moving lines underground is the best way to protect both the utility and the 16 million people who rely on it for power.

"It's too expensive not to do it. Lives are on the line," Poppe told reporters.

PG&E said only that burying the lines will take several years.

The biggest fire, in Butte County, wiped out the entire town of Paradise and resulted in PG&E pleading guilty to 84 felony counts of involuntary manslaughter last year just weeks before it emerged from one of the most complex cases in U.S. history.

As part of its bankruptcy, PG&E set up a \$13.5 billion trust to pay victims of its past wildfires, but that fund is facing a roughly \$2 billion shortfall because half its money is supposed to come from company stock that has been a market laggard.

Since getting out of bankruptcy, PG&E also has been rebuked by California power regulators and a federal judge overseeing its criminal probation for breaking promises to reduce the dangers posed by trees near its power lines. The utility has also been charged with another round of fire-related crimes that it denies committing.

Poppe insisted things are getting better this year under a plan that calls for PG&E to spend \$1.4 billion removing more than 300,000 trees and trimming another 1.1 million. But she conceded the utility is "not making enough progress" since it's only a fraction of that 8 million trees within striking distance of its power lines.

But she also defended PG&E's handling of the tree that may have caused the Dixie Fire and its response. The tree looked healthy and was about 40 feet (12 meters) from power lines, she said, making it a low-risk danger.

When a PG&E troubleshooter was sent out to inspect a potential problem, he noticed the tree had fallen and may have started a fire in a treacherous area that he tried to put out before firefighters arrived.

"His efforts can be called nothing less than heroic," Poppe said.

However, getting the job done within the next decade will require a quantum leap. In the few areas where PG&E has already been burying power lines, it has been completing about 70 miles (123 kilometers) annually.

PG&E expects to eventually be able to bury more than 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) of power lines annually, said its chief operating officer, Adam Wright. While Wright likened the project to the Marshall Plan that helped rebuild Europe after World War II, Poppe invoked President John F. Kennedy's 1962 pledge for the U.S. to land on the moon.

PG&E's path to this point has been strewn with death and destruction.

After previous leaders allowed its equipment to fall into disrepair in a apparent attempt to boost profits and management bonuses, the utility's grid was blamed for igniting a series of devastating wildfires in 2017 and 2018 that prompted the company to file for bankruptcy in 2019.

Did you know ... Flying embers from a wildfire can destroy homes up to a mile away and are responsible for the destruction of most homes during a wildfire.

[Visit the Ready for Wildfire website to learn more about what you can do to harden your home against wildfire and decrease the likelihood of ignition from embers and other sources.](#)



Smoke fills Pacific Valley on Ebbetts Pass (c) yosemitenorthphotography.com

Op-Ed: feeling the drought on my family farm

David Mas Masumoto / LA Times / July 19, 2021

I can see my future: It's dry, thirsty and bleak. On our farm, we live with drought daily, working with limited groundwater and learning to adjust and adapt, or to fail and abandon our fields. Water will determine a farmer's survival.

I farm organically outside Fresno, part of one of the world's richest and most productive agricultural oases, providing, of course, that we have water. Typically, we make use of two sources of the liquid gold: annual rainfall and snowmelt captured from the Sierra, and also the pool of groundwater lying beneath our land. Both are threatened by a lack of rain and snow, exacerbated by the slow depleting and over-pumping of our aquifers.

In the past, many of us took water for granted. We simply turned on the faucet or flicked an irrigation pump switch and the water magically appeared. It was there when we needed it until it was not.

Many farmers shifted to drip irrigation, which limits water usage and keeps plants alive but intensifies irrigation's depletion of soil biology. We fell into the trap of believing technology and innovation would rescue us from water scarcity. Today, a reality check greets each season: We can't make more water or control the forces of nature.

A severe two-year drought is drying out the West and Southwest from Washington to California, Montana to Texas. Agriculture feels the impact with crops withering and production limited. We have begun following some of our fields, pulling out vines and trees and leaving empty land that my father and grandfather cultivated. They would cringe to witness what must be done.

Every fallowed field means a declining rural economy and an uncertain future. The reach of the drought will be felt in grocery stores across the country with higher prices. Cheap food may no longer be the driving force in agriculture. Everyone will pay the price of a lack of water.

Climate change can't be denied. Historical rainfall amounts, based on 30-year averages, do not capture the significant variations of normal climate. And now drought is becoming the new normal; the golden era of consistent rainfall over the last 50 to 100 years may have been the anomaly. Megadroughts lasting decades may be on the horizon.

While farmers struggle with dwindling water, extreme temperatures — 116 in Portland, Ore., at the end of June or 118 in Phoenix — touch many more people. Suddenly nature takes on a new reality for city folks too, who feel the heat and can taste the sweat of climate change.

How do we value water? Some farmers and water districts are faced with the decision: Selling their water may be more profitable than farming. Will monetizing water become part of my family's farming operation?

A larger issue looms: Who rightfully owns water and how should a natural resource be controlled and allocated?

Already farmers in California — some kicking and screaming, others accepting that water has become a limited resource — must plan for sustainable groundwater use and limit our pumping so that our aquifers maintain a steady water supply. How do cities and the environment fit into our water future? The answer is not solely economic or political: We must re-envision water as something scarce and sacred and shared by all.

On our farm, [we grow perennial crops](#) — organic peaches, nectarines, apricots and grapes for raisins. We have 100-year-old vines and 60-year-old peach trees that have witnessed massive swings in climate — dwelling on one season or year is short-term thinking. COVID-19 underlines another lesson for this old farmer: Things are often out of our control. How we respond will determine what happens next.

I think of generations on the land, and what story I'm leaving behind for my daughter, Nikiko, who is partnering on the farm along with her brother, Korio. They will inherit climate change, prolonged droughts and whatever comes of the decisions we make now.

At the heart of our farm lies a Japanese aesthetic captured in the meaning of wabi-sabi: Life is imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. The drought exposes the inconsistency of nature and how the “perfect” peach must reflect the imperfect weather we all experience.

Despite our thirsty future, there's a note of hope for me — I believe our farm is still incomplete. I inherited all I have from my parents and grandparents; my children will take over this incomplete farming story and add their own chapters.

I'm reminded of the feeling early in a farm year. When I work the fields in spring, something is plowed into me. With these inconsistent yet regular droughts, something more is now plowed into our family farm.

David Mas Masumoto is a farmer in Del Rey, Calif., and the author of many books, including “Epitaph for a Peach: Four Seasons on My Family Farm.”

Scorched, parched, and now uninsurable: Climate Change hits wine country

Chris Flavelle / NY Times / July 18, 2021

ST. HELENA, Calif. — Last September, a wildfire tore through one of Dario Sattui’s Napa Valley wineries, destroying millions of dollars in property and equipment, along with 9,000 cases of wine.

November brought a second disaster: Sattui realized the precious crop of cabernet grapes that survived the fire had been ruined by the smoke. There would be no 2020 vintage.

A freakishly dry winter led to a third calamity: By spring, the reservoir at another of Sattui’s vineyards was all but empty, meaning little water to irrigate the new crop.

Finally, in March, came a fourth blow: Sattui’s insurers said they would no longer cover the winery that had burned down. Neither would any other company. In the patois of insurance, the winery will go bare into this year’s burning season, which experts predict to be especially fierce.

“We got hit every which way we could,” Sattui said. “We can’t keep going like this.”

In Napa Valley, the lush heartland of America’s high-end wine industry, climate change is spelling calamity. Not outwardly: On the main road running through the small town of St. Helena, California, tourists still stream into wineries with exquisitely appointed tasting rooms. At the Goose & Gander, where the lamb chops are \$63, the line for a table still tumbles out onto the sidewalk.

But drive off the main road, and the vineyards that made this valley famous — where the mix of soil, temperature patterns and rainfall used to be just right — are now surrounded by burned-out

landscapes, dwindling water supplies and increasingly nervous winemakers bracing for things to get worse.

Desperation has pushed some growers to spray sunscreen on grapes, to try to prevent roasting, while others are irrigating with treated wastewater from toilets and sinks because reservoirs are dry.

Their fate matters even for those who cannot tell a merlot from a malbec. Napa boasts some of the country's most expensive farmland, selling for as much as \$1 million per acre; a ton of grapes fetches two to four times as much as anywhere else in California. If there is any nook of U.S. agriculture with both the means and incentive to outwit climate change, it is here.

But so far, the experience of winemakers here demonstrates the limits of adapting to a warming planet.

If the heat and drought trends worsen, "we're probably out of business," said Cyril Chappellet, president of Chappellet Winery, which has been operating for more than a half-century. "All of us are out business."

'I Don't Like the Way the Reds Are Tasting'

Stu Smith's winery is at the end of a two-lane road that winds up the side of Spring Mountain, west of St. Helena. The drive requires some concentration: The 2020 Glass fire incinerated the wooden posts that held up the guardrails, which now lie like discarded ribbons at the edge of the cliff.

In 1971, after graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, Smith bought 165 acres of land here. He named his winery Smith Madrone, after the orange-red hardwoods with waxy leaves that surround the vineyards he planted. For almost three decades, those vineyards — 14 acres of cabernet, 7 acres each of chardonnay and riesling, plus a smattering of cabernet franc, merlot and petit verdot — were untouched by wildfires.

Then, in 2008, smoke from nearby fires reached his grapes for the first time. The harvest went on as usual. Months later, after the wine had aged but before it was bottled, Smith's brother, Charlie, noticed something was wrong. "He said, 'I just don't like the way the reds are tasting,'" Stu Smith said.

At first, Smith resisted the idea anything was amiss, but he eventually brought the wine to a laboratory in Sonoma County, which determined that smoke had penetrated the skin of the grapes to affect the taste.

What winemakers came to call "smoke taint" now menaces Napa's wine industry.

"The problem with the fires is that it doesn't have to be anywhere near us," Smith said. Smoke from distant fires can waft long distances, and there is no way a grower can prevent it.

Smoke is a threat primarily to reds, whose skins provide the wine's color. (The skins of white grapes, by contrast, are discarded, and with them the smoke residue.) Reds must also stay on the vine longer, often into October, leaving them more exposed to fires that usually peak in early fall.

Vintners could switch from red grapes to white, but that solution collides with the demands of the market. White grapes from Napa typically sell for around \$2,750 per ton, on average. Reds, by contrast, fetch an average of about \$5,000 per ton in the valley, and more for cabernet sauvignon. In Napa, there is a saying: Cabernet is king.

The damage in 2008 turned out to be a precursor of far worse to come. Haze from the Glass fire filled the valley; so many wine growers sought to test their grapes for smoke taint that the turnaround time at the nearest laboratory, once three days, became two months.

The losses have been stunning. In 2019, growers in the county sold \$829 million worth of red grapes. In 2020, that figure plummeted to \$384 million.

Among the casualties were Smith, whose entire crop was affected. Now the most visible legacy of the fire is the trees: The flames scorched not just the madrones that gave Smith's winery its name but also the Douglas firs, the tan oaks and the bay trees.

Trees burned by wildfires do not die immediately; some linger for years. One afternoon in June, Smith surveyed the damage to his forest, stopping at a madrone he especially liked but whose odds were not good. "It's dead," Smith said. "It just doesn't know it yet."

Sunscreen for Grapes

Across the valley, Aaron Whitlatch, head of winemaking at Green & Red Vineyards, climbed into a dust-colored jeep for a trip up the mountain to demonstrate what heat does to grapes.

After navigating steep switchbacks, Whitlatch reached a row of vines growing petite sirah grapes that were coated with a thin layer of white.

The week before, temperatures had topped 100 degrees, and staff sprayed the vines with sunscreen.

"Keeps them from burning," Whitlatch said.

The strategy had not worked perfectly. He pointed to a bunch of grapes at the very top of the peak exposed to sun during the hottest hours of the day. Some of the fruit had turned black and shrunken — becoming, effectively, absurdly high-cost raisins.

"The temperature of this cluster probably reached 120," Whitlatch said. "We got torched."

As the days get hotter and the sun more dangerous in Napa, wine growers are trying to adjust. A more expensive option than sunscreen is to cover the vines with shade cloth, Whitlatch said. Another tactic, even more costly, is to replant rows of vines so they are parallel to the sun in the warmest part of the day, catching less of its heat.

At 43, Whitlatch is a veteran of the wine fires. In 2017, he was an assistant winemaker at Mayacamas Vineyards, another Napa winery, when it was burned by a series of wildfires. This is his first season at Green & Red, which lost its entire crop of reds to smoke from the Glass fire.

After that fire, the winery's insurer wrote to the owners, Raymond Hannigan and Tobin Heminway, listing the changes needed to reduce its fire risk, including updating circuit breaker panels and adding fire extinguishers. "We spent thousands and thousands of dollars upgrading the property," Hannigan said.

A month later, Philadelphia Insurance Cos. sent the couple another letter, canceling their insurance anyway. The explanation was brief: "Ineligible risk — wildfire exposure does not meet current underwriting guidelines." The company did not respond to a request for comment.

Heminway and Hannigan have been unable to find coverage from any other carrier. The California Legislature is considering a bill that would allow wineries to get insurance through a state-run high-risk pool.

But even if that passes, Hannigan said, "it's not going to help us during this harvest season."

Half the Insurance, Five Times the Cost

Just south of Green & Red, Chappellet stood amid the bustle of wine being bottled and trucks unloading. Chappellet Winery is the picture of commercial-scale efficiency, producing some 70,000 cases of wine a year. The main building, which his parents built after buying the property in 1967, resembles a cathedral; gargantuan wooden beams soar upward, sheltering row after row of oak barrels aging a fortune's worth of cabernet.

After the Glass fire, Chappellet is one of the lucky ones; he still has insurance. It just costs five times as much as it did last year.

His winery now pays more than \$1 million a year, up from \$200,000 before the fire. At the same time, his insurers cut by half the amount of coverage they were willing to provide.

"It's insane," Chappellet said. "It's not something that we can withstand for the long term."

There are other problems. Chappellet pointed to his vineyards, where workers were cutting grapes from the vines — not because they were ready to harvest but because there was not enough water to keep them growing. He estimated it would reduce his crop this year by one-third.

"We don't have the luxury of giving them the normal amount that it would take them to be really healthy," Chappellet said.

To demonstrate why, he drove up a dirt road, stopping at what used to be the pair of reservoirs that fed his vineyards. The first was one-third full; the other, just above it, had become a barren pit. A pipe that once pumped out water instead lay on the dusty lake bed.

"This is the disaster," Chappellet said.

Water by the Truckload

When spring came this year, and the reservoir on Sattui's vineyard was empty, his colleague Tom Davies, president of V. Sattui Winery, crafted a backup plan. Davies found Joe Brown.

Eight times a day, Brown pulls into a loading dock at the city of Napa's sanitation department, fills a tanker truck with 3,500 gallons of treated wastewater and drives 10 miles to the vineyard, then turns around and does it again.

The water, which comes from household toilets and drains and is sifted, filtered and disinfected, is a bargain at \$6.76 a truckload. The problem is transportation: Each load costs Davies about \$140, which he guesses will add \$60,000 or more to the cost of running the vineyard this season.

And that is assuming Napa officials keep selling wastewater, which in theory could be made potable. As the drought worsens, the city may decide its residents need it more. "We're nervous that at some point, Napa sanitation says, 'No more water,'" Davies said.

After driving past the empty reservoir, Davies stopped at a hilltop overlooking the vineyard.

If Napa can go another year or two without major wildfires, Davies thinks insurers will return. Harder to solve are the smoke taint and water shortages.

"It's still kind of early on to talk about the demise of our industry," Davies said, looking out across the valley. "But it's certainly a concern."

What it means if 'ecocide' becomes an international crime

Jojo Mehta / The Hill / 7/10/21

Ecocide means to destroy the environment, but when considered etymologically, from the Greek and Latin, it signifies to kill one's home.



© Getty Images

What it means if 'ecocide' becomes an international crime

When we were first able to view, and photograph, the Earth from space, our planetary perspective changed. Suddenly "home" had a whole new meaning. Nowhere, as far as our technology has been

able to discern, is there evidence of any planet like Earth - anywhere else that can sustain life as we know it.

In its recent 11,700-year period of climatic stability, that is what our planetary home has done, facilitating the spread and technological advance of human civilization. While benefiting many in terms of material comfort, life expectancy and societal support structures, this advance has increasingly taken place within a framework of thought that perceives nature as "other" - a resource to be exploited, or a foe to be conquered. The Oxford English Dictionary even defines nature as "opposed to humans."

With this perspective, ever since the industrial revolution, we have been - at first unwittingly, now recklessly and even knowingly - disrupting the biological, chemical and atmospheric systems on whose stable interaction we intimately and profoundly depend. Greenhouse gas emissions are just one part of this story. Bit by bit, with each felled forest, polluted river system, species extinction, oil spill, toxic waste leak, nuclear or mining disaster, we are committing ecocide. Relentlessly, and with startling rapidity, we are killing our home - while exacerbating social injustice, racial inequality and resource conflict along the way.

And because our legal system doesn't treat environmental destruction with the seriousness we are now beginning to understand it warrants, we are doing this with impunity.

The word "ecocide" was first used on the international stage by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme at the UN environment conference in Stockholm (1972), when he stated that "destruction brought about... by large scale use of bulldozers and pesticides is an outrage sometimes described as ecocide, which requires urgent international attention."

Nearly 50 years later, the world is at last beginning to pay that attention. Last month an expert panel of top international criminal and environmental lawyers, convened by the Stop Ecocide Foundation, proposed a legal definition of the term, suitable for adoption into the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a fifth crime alongside genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression. Responding to the explicit call of climate-vulnerable island nations Vanuatu and the Maldives, directly impacted by rising sea levels and heavy tropical storms, such a move would criminalize, "unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts."

The warmth of response to this legal definition has been remarkable. Sparking articles in over 100 global publications in the first week, from the Financial Times to Der Spiegel and from Bloomberg to Le Monde, it has also prompted political action. From Bangladesh to the Caribbean to the UK (where an amendment to the government's Environment Bill includes the newly released definition in full), diplomats and politicians are joining a conversation which already includes EU states such as France and Belgium and has the support of public figures as influential and diverse as Pope Francis and Greta Thunberg.

Since the International Criminal Court's mandate is the prosecution of individuals, the addition of ecocide to the list of crimes considered "of most serious concern to the international community as a whole" would make key corporate and political actors personally liable to criminal prosecution in any ratifying state, should their decisions threaten severe and either widespread or long-term

environmental damage - thus creating an enforceable deterrent to help prevent finance from flowing to projects that could destroy ecosystems. Nothing concentrates the mind like having one's personal freedom on the line.

Moreover, ecocide law may prove to be not just a stick but also a carrot. Setting a criminal parameter will not only steer activity away from hazards - acting as a kind of health and safety law for the planet - but is likely to stimulate innovation and development in a healthy direction in a wide range of economic sectors. Many of the solutions we need to transition to sustainability are already available - renewable energy, regenerative agriculture, circular economy - but aren't being supported or developed at scale while finance continues to flow towards the same old destructive approaches, leaving those who would do the right thing at a disadvantage.

Criminalizing ecosystem destruction at the highest level could also shore up and strengthen the whole edifice of environmental law, supporting all those working to improve regulation and best practice, from frontline activists to academics, scientists, NGOs and policymakers.

While it would be naive to believe that establishing this crime would be a silver bullet for all of our environmental woes, or even prevent all ecocides, it is difficult to see how our planet's life-support systems can be adequately protected - or indeed Paris targets and UN Sustainable Development Goals realistically approached - without a "hard stop" intervention of this kind. This year's [NDC synthesis report](#) from the UNFCCC certainly suggests that we're not doing well without it. Goodwill agreements and raised ambitions are clearly not up to the task.

But perhaps the most powerful effect of defining and criminalizing ecocide as an international crime may be that of beginning to shift cultural and moral assumptions. Our understanding of our place in, and responsibility towards, the natural world is in dire need of a reality check. Calling out and condemning ecocide for what it is may be exactly what is required if we are to begin to transform our relationship with the Earth from one of harm to one of harmony. That may be the best way to ensure our children, and our children's children, will still be able to call this beautiful planet "home."

Jojo Mehta is co-founder and executive director of [Stop Ecocide International](#) and chair of the charitable Stop Ecocide Foundation. She co-founded the public campaign in 2017 (alongside legal pioneer the late Polly Higgins) to support making severe harm to nature an international crime and has overseen the growth of the global movement while coordinating legal developments, diplomatic traction and public narrative.





Smoke from the 2020 Creek Fire approaches (c) yosemitenorthphotography.com



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