



CALIFORNIA

# California fire officials are dropping more retardant as environmental advocates fume



A Cal Fire plane drops Phos-Chek fire retardant on a brush fire. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

BY RYAN FONSECA | STAFF WRITER

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Good morning, and welcome to the Essential California [newsletter](#). It's **Wednesday, July 5.**

As summer dries out our wild spaces — many of which saw heavy plant growth after a rainy winter — fire season is again upon us.

One of the most potent visuals is one you'll reliably see each year on TV and news sites: a plane flying low over a mountainside, dumping a heavy cloud of hot pink flame retardant.

That brightly colored slurry, known as Phos-Chek, coats vegetation and other fire fuel in a layer of ammonium phosphate, slowing a fire's advance.

While firefighting officials stand by Phos-Chek as a proven and necessary tool, some environmental advocates worry its increasing use has negative ecological impacts that officials aren't fully considering.

“Studies have shown the retardant can harm plants, fish and other species, including [steelhead trout](#) and [Chinook salmon](#),” my colleague Hayley Smith [reported this week](#). “It can also act as a fertilizer that grows more vegetation, which can later act as fuel for fires.”

Earlier this year, the group Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics [filed a lawsuit in Montana](#), claiming that some drops are polluting waterways, a violation of the federal Clean Water Act.

In May, a federal judge agreed that the U.S. Forest Service is violating the law, but [allowed forest officials to continue using Phos-Chek](#), arguing that the tool is sometimes necessary to protect lives and property. As Hayley wrote:

*Many who fight fires said banning the use of retardant would be catastrophic for California and the West, where wildfires are burning larger, hotter and faster than ever before.*

CalFire dropped more retardant than water over the past three years, agency data showed — roughly 13 million gallons more.



Phos-Chek covers the southbound 23 Freeway as firefighters make a stand against the 2019 Easy fire burning in Moorpark. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

And as this year’s fire season ramps up, Californians could see even more Phos-Chek coating roadsides, trees and property lines. Actually, we may not see it. The manufacturer of Phos-Chek has been marketing a new, colorless version of the retardant — called Phos-Chek Fortify — directly to landowners.

The product is not without criticism, as some worry its increasing use in and around wild spaces could do unknown harms when the next rain storm washes it down hills or into ocean-bound storm drains. One former firefighter critical of the use of Phos-Chek called the manufacture’s latest product push “a government boondoggle.”

“Meanwhile,” Hayley wrote, “dozens of California government organizations, as well as private and commercial landowners have begun using Phos-Chek Fortify.”

And now, **here’s what’s happening across California:**

*Note: Some of the sites we link to may limit the number of stories you can access without subscribing.*

## L.A. stories

Hot enough for ya? **The heat is on in Southern California, thanks to a high pressure system.** Temperatures are expected to cool off a bit by Thursday, according to forecasters, but another warmup is slated for next week. [Los Angeles Times](#)

**LADWP customers who are late on paying their utility bill won’t have to worry about their service getting shut off during some severe weather events.** The utility’s commissioners recently voted to suspend water and power shutoffs if the National Weather Service issues an extreme heat or cold weather advisory or warning. [Los Angeles Daily News](#)

## Government and politics

Equipped with funds from a state grant, the city of Grass Valley was making real progress reaching unhoused residents and connecting them with housing. But then the one-time grant ran dry, abruptly ending a successful program. **Homeless service providers say it’s indicative of the need for ongoing funding to address the crisis at a meaningful level.** [CalMatters](#)





Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks with supporters at a private fundraiser in Boise, Idaho. (Hannah Wiley / Los Angeles Times )

Gov. Gavin Newsom campaigned for President Biden's reelection bid in Idaho this week. **But it's not a stretch to view the 55-year-old Democrat's high-profile ground game in red states as simultaneously laying some groundwork for his own political aspirations post-governorship.** [Los Angeles Times](#)

**A 2018 state law that adds new regulation to the pork industry has finally taken effect after years of legal battles that reached the U.S. Supreme Court.** The law requires pig farmers to provide more space for breeding the animals in their pens in order to sell their products in California. Opponents of the new rules said consumers could see the prices of ham, bacon and other products increase. [Los Angeles Times](#)

## Crime, courts and policing

**A Poway man admitted that he'd hidden his mother's death for 32 years and collected more than \$830,000 in publicly funded benefits over that time.**

Donald Felix Zampach pleaded guilty in a San Diego federal court to Social Security fraud and money laundering. He's been ordered to pay back the stolen money in fines and restitution. [Los Angeles Times](#)

**The Orange County Sheriff's Department is investigating a possible hate crime after staff at a Christian camp reported a large wooden cross had been sawed down on their property last week.** Officials from the Santiago Retreat Center, which hosts a children's camp and other religious retreats, say they plan to restore the cross with some added security. [Los Angeles Times](#)

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## California culture

Do you ever think about where some personal item you lost ended up? **Here's a fun story in that spirit, chronicling every item left on San Francisco's public transit system over a six-year period — from wallets to a Chia pet to a machete.** The most commonly lost item in the lost and found? Cellphones. [San Francisco Chronicle](#)

**"Better late than never," read a note to Fresno library staff that was included with a book returned after 83 years.** Staff said they'll waive the late fee for the overdue copy of "Mother" by Kathleen Norris, which had been checked out when Franklin D. Roosevelt was president. [The Fresno Bee](#)

## Free online games

Get our free daily crossword puzzle, sudoku, word search and arcade games in our new game center at [latimes.com/games](https://www.latimes.com/games).

## And finally

Today's **California landmark** is from **Patrick Pine** of Tehachapi: **Carson Mansion** in Eureka.





The Carson Mansion, photographed in August 2022. (Patrick Pine)



*The Carson Mansion in Eureka is the ultimate example of a Victorian mansion on the California coast. It has been maintained in pristine condition over the years and is home to a private membership group. The mansion was built from the lumber harvested in far northern California... and its top room allowed the original resident to view Humboldt Bay, which has been home to salmon fishing and crab harvesting for decades. Both the lumber and fishing industries of the north coast were thriving when the mansion was built but have declined since, so the mansion is emblematic of the north coast's past.*

**What are California's essential landmarks? [Fill out this form to send us your photos of a special spot in California](#) — natural or human-made. Tell us why it's interesting and what makes it a symbol of life in the Golden State. Please be sure to include only photos taken directly by you. Your submission could be featured in a future edition of the newsletter.**

**Please let us know what we can do to make this newsletter more useful to you. Send comments to [essentialcalifornia@latimes.com](mailto:essentialcalifornia@latimes.com).**

*Correction: Monday's edition of the newsletter said employees at 62 hotels in Los Angeles and Orange counties were scheduled to walk off the job as early as Saturday after their contracts expire. Sixty-one contracts between workers represented by Unite Here Local 11 and Southern California hotel sites expired Friday at midnight.*



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County, including radio, documentary, print and television outlets. Most recently, he was an associate editor for LAist.com and KPCC-FM (89.3) public radio, covering transportation and mobility. He returns to The Times after previously working as an assistant web editor for Times Community News, where he helped manage the websites and social media presence of the Burbank Leader, Glendale News-Press and La Cañada Valley Sun. Fonseca studied journalism at Cal State Northridge, where he now teaches the next generation of journalists to develop their voice and digital skills.