

San Francisco Chronicle

OPINION//OPEN FORUM

I live near the Moss Landing battery fire. Vistra Energy's response is not enough

By Megan Thiele Strong Feb 6, 2025

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/vistra-power-plant-fire-climate-action-20149086.php>



Is it safe in the surrounding area after a fire at the Vistra energy storage plant in Moss Landing? Residents reported sore throats, headaches and nosebleeds, and scientists found increased toxic metals in the nearby soil. Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle 2021

On Jan. 16, one of the world's [largest lithium battery storage plants](#), the Vistra Power Plant in Moss Landing, erupted in flames, leaving approximately 1,500 nearby residents with a decision: Do I stay or should I evacuate?

Although authorities initially issued evacuation orders for the hundreds of people closest to the site out of concern over dangerous gases harming air quality, that concern soon abated. Four days after the fire, the Environmental Protection Agency [announced](#) it had conducted air quality monitoring near the power plant and that there was “no threat to public health throughout the incident.”

As someone living 16 miles away from the site whose 7-year-old attended school less than 20 miles from it, I wasn't sure what to do. Were we actually safe like the EPA was now saying? Why then did I have a metallic taste in my mouth during the burn? Why did [community members report](#) sore throats, headaches and nosebleeds in the days since the fire?

And now, with scientists confirming [increased toxic metals](#) in the nearby soil — hundreds to a thousand times higher than previous measurements — I'm as unsure about the safety of the surrounding community as ever.

As a professor of environmental sociology, I know the confusion surrounding chemical pollution is not unusual. There's a term for it: [toxic uncertainty](#). Coined by researchers Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun in their 2012 book “Flammable,” toxic uncertainty is part of the double life of pollution; pollution exists in our air and bodies, and can also consume our thoughts.

Producers of toxic substances understand that it works in their favor to keep the public in doubt about what is dangerous and what isn't. Maybe the cancers that my dad and uncle died from were caused by exposure to harmful pesticides in their childhood, or maybe not. There's no way to tell.

But there are a few things we do know.

We know [cancer diagnoses](#) are rising in the U.S., especially in [younger populations](#). While there are a host of suspected contributing factors, we also know [living near industrial energy sites](#) trends with [higher risk](#) of cancer. We also know other industries can cause similar health risks to neighboring communities, including [agriculture](#) and [manufacturing](#). And, that not everyone shares in this health burden equally. Industry and its disasters disproportionately burden historically and strategically marginalized communities of color and those with less economic resources in part because [locally unwanted land uses](#), such as industry sites, tend to be located nearest these populations.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Industry values profit, not people — which is why those of us concerned with our collective well-being must push our government leaders at all levels to integrate the [precautionary principle](#) into policymaking.

Part of customary international environmental law, the precautionary principle holds that those who design products should be responsible for guaranteeing their long-term safety to public health before they are put into production. Thus, the onus is on the originator of the product, rather than consumer protection agencies and time. And, if there is significant risk present, we choose safety over potential harm.

Yes, enforcing the precautionary principle would be difficult. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) already allows and regulates toxic chemicals in our economy. Over [3 billion pounds](#) of toxic chemicals were released in 2022 in the United States; nearly [600 million pounds](#) directly to the air. There are likely hazards of which we are not yet aware. And even though [experts recommend](#) more regulation of synthetic chemicals in our supply chain, we are rapidly integrating new technology under a Trump administration that promises to [resist regulation](#) and [climate care](#).

It might seem improbable then that the precautionary principle could gain momentum at the federal level anytime soon. But as with much of the resistance to the harmful policies of the current administration, efforts are not only about fending off the immediate harms but laying the groundwork for the long term. That work can start at the local level. And at that level, there is reason to hope. In [2003](#), San Francisco adopted the precautionary principle into its [municipal code](#). With that on the books, San Francisco became a [case study](#) in environmental strategy for other cities to learn from and emulate.

The Vistra power plant fire presents an opportunity. Too often more financially resourced communities protect local spaces, but they fail to think globally. In that shortsightedness, environmental risk is simply relocated.

The company that owns the Moss Landing power plant, Vistra Energy, has [set up a \\$450,000 fund](#) for evacuees and is offering \$750 gift cards to anyone who resides in the evacuation zone. Californians, through direct organizing and pressuring our elected officials, can choose to let the company know that handing out a gift card and a few hundred dollars to everyone is not a sufficient response.

Vistra could run tests on the nearby water, soil and agriculture, conduct a thorough analysis of what went wrong and let the public know what it found. The company could also inform the public of what it intends to do to prevent another fire. In so doing, the public has an accountability plan to hold the company to, and

other communities where battery energy storage systems are located or are being considered have a potential plan at their disposal.

We need to more accurately measure the impacts of potential industrial bads and hopefully eliminate the threat of them — because zero is always the recommended number of power plant fires.

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