

# Independent soil testing finds staggering levels of toxic contamination in Los Angeles fire zones

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A report published by the *Los Angeles Times* over the weekend reveals staggering levels of toxic soil contamination left in the wake of January's devastating wildfires, laying bare a deepening public health emergency and the criminal negligence of government authorities at every level.

Testing shows toxic heavy metals like lead, arsenic and mercury at levels hazardous to human health, with children and workers bearing the brunt of the risk. The local, state and federal government response, or rather lack thereof, illustrates a broader political failure, with environmental oversight failing at every level, revealing systemic gaps rather than isolated missteps.

Biochemical data underscores the gravity: arsenic, a carcinogen, impairs lung function and heightens cancer risk even at low levels; lead causes irreversible neurodevelopmental damage in children; mercury is linked to nervous system disorders. These risks are amplified when fires ravage aging homes coated in lead-based paint, a widespread issue in Los Angeles's older neighborhoods and, doubtless, across the country.

The *Los Angeles Times*' testing, using government-standard methodologies, confirmed the danger. Lupe Sanchez's yard showed lead levels 20 times the state's safety limit, along with arsenic and mercury exceeding hazardous thresholds. Sanchez lamented to the *Times*, "We thought we were safe after the debris was cleared, but now we know our kids have been playing in poison." Tom Purnell's soil showed similarly high contamination; he remarked, "We've been left to clean up a mess no one warned us about. It's criminal negligence."

About 85 percent of homeowners enrolled in the Army Corps of Engineers' cleanup, which removed

surface debris but left contaminated soils intact. The costs for deeper remediation are astronomical, out of reach for working families.

Meanwhile, California's FAIR Plan—the insurer of last resort—has ballooned as private insurers flee fire-prone areas. Between 2020 and 2024, FAIR Plan policies in fire zones nearly doubled to 28,440, with homeowners mired in disputes and delays, often forced into lawsuits for insufficient payouts.

The situation of those who are most at risk is clear and chilling. Clean-up workers, construction crews, and landscapers are in direct contact with contaminated soils daily, while children, whose behaviors and developing bodies make them uniquely vulnerable, face long-term health hazards simply by playing outdoors.

Particularly hard-hit are lower-income communities, already overburdened by the environmental crisis. Entire neighborhoods, built decades before the 1978 lead paint ban, remain toxic. Fires churn up old lead-based paint and other toxins, depositing them back into residential soil—a hazard policymakers of both big business parties have ignored for generations.

At the top of this debacle is the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which has refused to conduct the necessary level of soil sample testing across the burned out neighborhoods. In an immediate sense, the roots of its inaction trace back to a 2020 policy decision under Trump's first presidency, when FEMA was instructed to stop funding crucial wildfire cleanup measures such as soil sampling and deeper excavation. This reckless rollback gutted the federal capacity to ensure public safety.

Then, in a show of breathtaking cynicism, Trump visited Los Angeles in January amid the wildfires,

berating FEMA for being “too bureaucratic and slow” and threatening to dismantle it—despite having himself undercut its ability to perform.

The Democrats under the Biden administration, for their part, did nothing to reverse this deadly policy, letting the status quo fester. Rather than an isolated event, this bipartisan failure aligns with the patterns observed in disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Maria as well as the handling of the COVID pandemic, highlighting a long-standing trajectory of governmental negligence and institutional breakdown.

Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom’s complicity is glaring. Instead of mobilizing California’s vast resources—the fourth-largest economy in the world, home to 197 billionaires and nearly 1,200 centi-millionaires—Newsom deferred to federal authorities, issuing press releases demanding action while failing to deploy state-led soil testing. His public pleas ring hollow against his actual record: no meaningful California-led intervention materialized, leaving thousands exposed to carcinogenic dust and toxic soils.

Locally, Democratic Mayor Karen Bass and the Los Angeles City Council offered little more than symbolic gestures. They authorized minimal soil sampling “to gain a general understanding of the situation,” a strategy devoid of meaningful warnings about the dangers or any serious clean up initiatives.

Worse, Los Angeles County and the city have issued numerous rebuilding permits with zero soil testing requirements, with hundreds more applications awaiting approval. This confirms that the rebuilding of Los Angeles under the capitalist system will only lay the foundation for further disasters.

A series of statements by experts lays out the dangers produced by the systemic failure. Environmental advocate Jane Williams, speaking to the *Times*, bluntly stated: “Without effective hazard communication, you don’t give people the option to make good choices. It’s beyond wrong. It’s immoral.”

Greg Kochanowski of the American Institute of Architects’ wildfire task force also warned about the range of the risks: “The ramifications are huge. California becomes the poster child for a lot of this because of the amount of fires that we do have. But we’re seeing fires in New York, in Florida—all over the country. This is a national issue that I think has

implications on all state budgets.”

Rachel Morello-Frosch, an environmental health scientist at UC Berkeley, echoed this, stating, “The problem is systemic. It’s not enough to clear debris; we need comprehensive environmental health assessments to prevent these hidden dangers from compounding future disasters.”

These statements highlight a failure that extends far beyond Los Angeles. The crisis is not a local anomaly but a manifestation of a global refusal to protect populations from environmental hazards under the profit-driven capitalist system.

On top of an already catastrophic situation, figures like Health and Human Services secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has played a pernicious role in undermining public health through anti-scientific measures, and Dr. Mehmet Oz, now head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, who champions privatization of essential health services, epitomize how this rot permeates every level of governance and policy. The same neglect is mirrored internationally, wherever disaster response and prevention is subordinated to corporate interests and short-term profit.

Meanwhile, private equity firms, led by billionaires like Rick Caruso, are poised to rebuild atop poisoned ground with no accountability. Jane Williams of California Communities Against Toxics warns, “We are setting the stage for generational harm that will haunt these communities for decades.”

The Los Angeles wildfires and their aftermath have exposed the lethal inadequacies of disaster response under capitalism. California has the wealth and capacity to ensure a comprehensive, rational and safe recovery and to prevent future disasters—but under this system, resources are siphoned off for profit rather than public safety. This crisis underscores an urgent need to fight for socialism: a system that prioritizes human health and safety over private profit which will safeguard communities against environmental catastrophe and the disastrous effects of climate change.



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