



## NEWS

# After Huge Monterey County Battery Fire, Locals Describe Headaches, Nausea and a Taste of Metal

By Juan Carlos Lara Jan 24 [Save Article](#)

A view of flames at Moss Landing Power Plant located on Pacific Coast Highway in Monterey Bay, California, on Jan. 16, 2025. (Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu via Getty Images)

Hazy skies, a rank, perhaps acidic smell in the air, and a lingering taste of metal. Later — headaches, sore throats and nausea.

Residents in the Monterey and Santa Cruz areas have reported such health issues in the wake of [last week's massive fire at a Monterey County energy storage facility](#), fearing they are related. Authorities have said they didn't detect toxins in the smoke, but some experts worry the test results aren't giving the full picture — and now state and local officials will be conducting further testing.

Eva Faste said she was outside her home in the Santa Cruz Mountains with her dogs when she first started getting a headache and a sore throat.

She didn't think much of it until that night when her phone



She didn't think much of it until that night when her phone buzzed with an alert about a battery storage facility that had caught fire roughly 25 miles away in Moss Landing.

"I woke up the following morning, my nose was bleeding, and since then, I've been feeling worse every day," Faste said. Her sore throat, along with stomach problems and low energy, have persisted into this week, even though the fire has since died out.

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The Jan. 16 fire started at what is reportedly the largest lithium battery storage facility in the world, with over 100,000 batteries used to store solar power and other forms of electricity to help supply the grid. The flames raged for hours, igniting the batteries stored within the facility and sending a dark plume of smoke high into the air until 80% of the building and its contents were consumed.

Lithium battery fires are notoriously difficult to extinguish and, as is often the case, emergency responders decided to let the fire burn itself out.

Since then, a Facebook group about possible fire-related symptoms has ballooned to more than 2,000 members. People have mentioned, along with Faste's symptoms, a metallic taste in their mouth and a persistent smell in the air.

One person who spoke at Tuesday's Monterey County Board of Supervisors meeting compared the sensation to what they experienced while receiving chemotherapy.

"I live in Prunedale. I have never had a metallic taste in my mouth before," Heather Griffin said. "Yes, there are people who burn fires in their fireplaces; we do, too. But I've never had a metallic taste."

The day after the fire began, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency began monitoring the air for small particulate matter and hydrogen fluoride, a highly toxic gas emitted by lithium-ion battery fires. Officials set up nine nearby monitoring stations and did not detect harmful levels of either pollutant, the agency said,

adding that the sensors for hydrogen fluoride can also detect other compounds.

“To be conservative and most protective of public health, our operations assumed anything we were detecting was hydrogen fluoride, which is the most harmful of these mineral acid gases,” the EPA said in a statement. “And, as noted before, no hydrogen fluoride exceeding health standards was detected.”

A contractor hired by Vistra simultaneously tested for most of the same compounds and received similar results.

However, experts said sensors are unlikely to pick up hydrogen fluoride once the main smoke plume has died down.

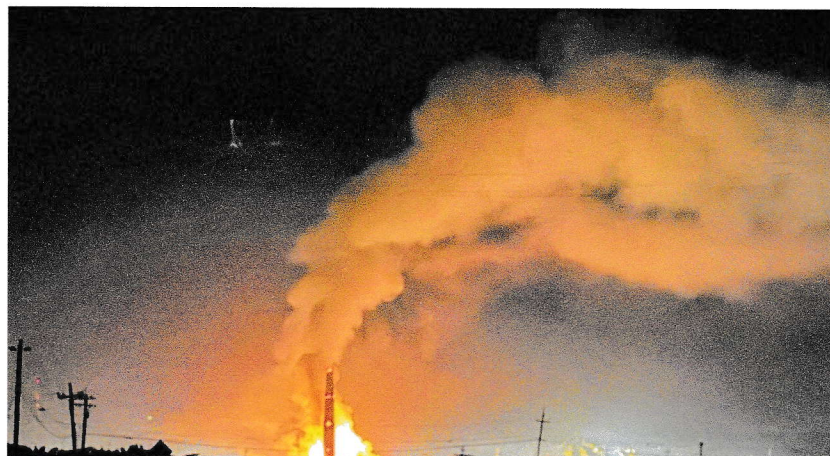
“These chemistries dictate to us that those compounds are not going to last for a very long time in the air,” said Michael Polkabila, the principal industrial hygienist with BioMax Environmental, a consulting firm specializing in hazardous materials and industrial hygiene. “So it’s really irrelevant to measure hydrogen fluoride hours after the plume passes because it’s going to be gone.”

And although the full list of specific elements within Vistra’s batteries is not publicly known, Polkabila has a few other pollutants he’s concerned about.

“The metals — lithium, nickel, magnesium, cobalt are kind of the big four that would be produced and could have settled. These all have individual toxicities associated with them,” Polkabila said.



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A fire burns at Moss Landing Power Plant on Thursday, Jan. 16, 2025. (Courtesy Iman-Floyd Carroll)

Dustin Mulvaney, an environmental studies professor at San José State University, agreed, adding that a more comprehensive test would have required sending a drone into the smoke plume to test hydrogen fluoride there. He, like Polkabila, also worries about the other pollutants that the fire could have let off.

“You may think of a fire as a big chemical reactor doing an uncontrolled chemical reaction,” Mulvaney said. “So it’s actually the fire itself is sometimes manufacturing pollutants.”

He added that the smoke plume could have carried some heat-resistant materials like metals or PFAS, also known as forever chemicals, because they take a very long time to break down.

“I think the public that’s experiencing these symptoms is going to want to know what they were actually exposed to,” Mulvaney said. “And I don’t think that those EPA sensors are telling the full story of what was in that plume.”

The EPA clarified that it did initially test for other compounds, including carbon monoxide and ammonia, then transitioned to focusing on particulate matter and hydrogen fluoride because they “are the two contaminants of concern from a battery fire that would pose a potential immediate health risk through inhalation.”

On Jan. 20, four days after the fire started, the EPA ended its monitoring.

With the fire now over, Mulvaney and Polkabila both said that the best way to learn about the pollutants that were dispersed is to test soil and water samples both at the facility and in neighboring regions — including environmentally significant areas like

Monterey Bay and the Elkhorn Slough.

“Those particles are not necessarily going away unless they’re removed,” Polkabila said. “If they’re a hazard, we need to identify what it is and have a protocol for how to remove that.”

During a Wednesday press briefing, Vistra’s Senior Director of Community Affairs, Brad Watson, said the company might test the soil “if there are indications around the site that there might be some compounds or constituents that we think need to be tested.”

Monterey County officials used similarly indefinite language during the meeting, but by Thursday afternoon, Supervisor Glenn Church announced that local and state officials plan to do both water and soil testing.

“I think there’s been a lot of concerns from folks and in this area of what is really out there. So we’re looking into that,” Church said.

The county Health Department said late Thursday that local and state partners will work together on collecting samples of water, debris and dust at the Vistra facility and in nearby areas, though they have not yet determined a timeline. Additional water and soil testing will follow, county representatives said.

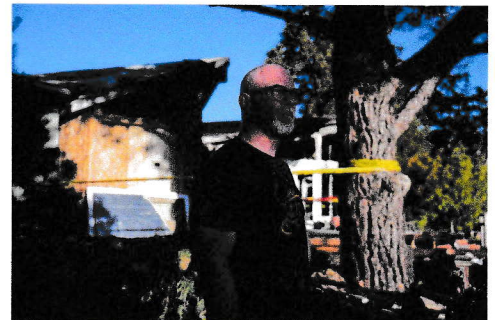
Health officials added that residents who may have found residue from the fires on their property are urged to use caution when cleaning up.

In the meantime, some continue to worry about what they are potentially being exposed to.

Faste and her husband are considering leaving the area for a while in the hopes that her symptoms will diminish once she’s farther from the site of the fire.

“We’re debating what to do, you know? We live here. I have a disability, so it’s really hard for me to go places. I’m in a wheelchair most of the time, so it’s complicated,” Faste said.

The couple will likely book a short-term rental or stay with family



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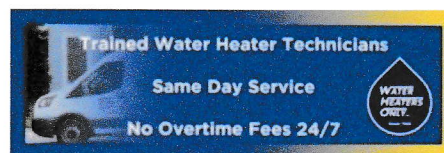
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The couple will likely book a short-term rental or stay with family for about a week and then reevaluate. Although the move won't be easy, Faste said she has a compromised immune system and worries she'll get worse if they stay.

"We kind of moved in the mountains to be in the clean air," she said. "So it's kind of sad that we will have to leave because the air is not good."

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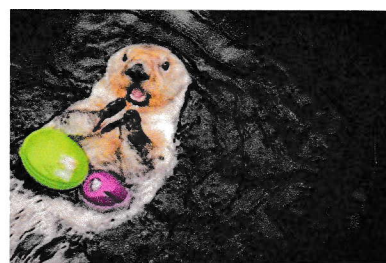
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