Assemblymember Damon Connolly
State of California General Assembly
Chair, Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee
c/o Assemblymember Tom Steel, Chief of Staff
1020 N Street, Sacramento, California 95814

March 4, 2026

Dear Chairman Connolly and Honorable Members of the Assembly:

I write in support of the efforts described in California Assembly Bill 1642, the *Wildfire Environmental Safety and Testing Act*, and to share my professional perspective. I reviewed the bill text on March 4, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. EST at: https://calmatters.digitaldemocracy.org/bills/ca_202520260ab1642.

My support is informed by more than 20 years of experience in disaster response and recovery. As an environmental engineer and professor at Purdue University, I have assisted public officials, households, and businesses respond to and recover from some of the most destructive recent U.S. wildfires. These include incidents in California, Colorado, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Oregon. There, I helped rapidly identify chemical contamination and mitigate health risks—critical steps in restoring community safety. My perspective is also shaped by experiences rapidly identifying and mitigating health risks following major chemical spills and the chemical disaster in East Palestine, Ohio which contaminated residential and commercial properties.

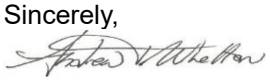
One of the most significant post-fire health concerns is the deposition of hazardous chemicals across properties. Substances such as heavy metals, asbestos, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) can originate from burned structures and materials. These contaminants pose meaningful health risks, particularly for children and immunocompromised individuals. Their proper identification and removal are essential to restoring community safety, protecting property value, and reducing future legal liabilities.

The activities described in AB 1642 address a longstanding need for clear standards to guide post-fire assessment and restoration. Based on my review of more than 500 residential testing reports from the Palisades Fire and Eaton Fire alone – and my firsthand experience assisting property and business owners – I offer the following observations:

1. In absence of standards, some companies do not test for the chemicals known to be released during fires including those that pose immediate and long-term health risks. Subsequent chemical testing – *at the same properties by other firms* – has, in some cases, identified extreme levels of lead, arsenic, asbestos, VOC, or other metal contamination, conditions that rendered properties unsafe to occupy or even for property owners to enter.
2. In absence of standards, some companies that sample properties for post-fire contaminants have directly compared their test results to occupational worker exposure limits and made conclusions that levels found do not pose health risks for children. Such comparisons are inappropriate; infants and children are not workers and require health-protective benchmarks tailored to their vulnerabilities.
3. In absence of standards, some companies have indicated that they do not conduct chemical-specific post-fire testing (e.g., for lead, asbestos, VOCs) because no law explicitly requires it.

Efforts outlined in AB 1642 represent an important opportunity to establish consistent, health-protective standards for post-fire environmental testing and remediation. I respectfully urge consideration of these issues. Please contact me at awhelton@purdue.edu if I can provide additional information.

Sincerely,



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Signing in a personal capacity; affiliation listed for identification purposes only

Enclosure

Some materials to consider for post-fire property assessment and restoration standards

Topic	Date	Title / Description	Link
Indoor Environment	Sept. 2025	Guidance – *After a Wildfire: Considerations for Building Environmental Testing*	https://www.doi.org/10.5703/1288284317911
Indoor Environment	Oct. 13, 2025	Results – Opinion. Briefing to the California Department of Insurance Smoke Claims and Fire Remediation Task Force	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/resources/CA-Dept-Ins-Oct13-2025.pdf
Indoor Environment	Oct. 16, 2025	Results – Opinion. California Department of Insurance Smoke Claims and Fire Remediation Task Force	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/opinions/Opinion-for-CA-DOI-October-2025.pdf
Numerous	Sept. 9, 2025	Results – *REBUILD Community Survey Report* related to the January 2025 Palisades and Eaton Fires in Los Angeles County	https://www.doi.org/10.5703/1288284317912
Property Soil Safety	May 14, 2025	Opinion – Recommendation to adopt statewide post-fire debris removal and soil confirmatory sampling practices	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/opinions/Opinion-Soil-Testing-Post-Fire-2025-05-14.pdf
Property Soil Safety	Aug. 31, 2025	Opinion – Problems and solutions regarding DTSC Post-Fire Soil Testing Guidance Document	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/opinions/Opinion-Soil-Guidance-Post-Fire-2025-08-25.pdf
Property Soil Safety	Jan. 26, 2026	Opinion – California Code related to property assessment and restoration after fire	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/opinions/Opinion-Post-Fire-Assessment-and-Restoration-Recommendations-2026-01-26.pdf
Numerous	Ongoing	After the Fires Webinar Series: Lessons from the 2025 Eaton Fire and Palisades Fire, California	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/resources/REBUILD-after-the-fires
Numerous	Ongoing	Los Angeles Fires Public Health Response	https://engineering.purdue.edu/PlumbingSafety/project/LA-fires

Background: Since 2017 my multi-organizational teams and I have been assisting communities respond to and recover from fires in and outside the United States. In response to the January 2025 Los Angeles Fires, we have been working with and assisting California property owners, businesses, government officials, as well as academics. Specifically, we have assisted on topics such as the safety of infrastructure, drinking water, soil, indoor environment, fruit and gardens, insurance, and mental health with several other partners. Results of some of our completed and ongoing work can be found here. In addition to our government agency collaborators, our college and university collaborators have included: University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Cal Poly Pomona, Chico State University, Butte College, University of California Berkeley, University of Southern California (USC), University of Kentucky, Tufts University, California State University, Northridge (CSUN), Colorado State University, Oregon State University, University of Colorado, Chapman University, and California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech). Further, we have worked side by side with community groups, as well as individual households and business owners. Our historical work has resulted in the first evidence-based playbook for post-fire drinking water utility response and recovery. We also developed evidence-based playbooks for property owner response to agricultural water systems, private wells, and building pluming. These were an expert blend of property owner experiences, industry input, field experience and research.