

California adopts 22 new laws taking aim at wildfire danger

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Search and rescue workers look for human remains at a trailer park burned out from the Camp fire in Paradise, California. (AP Photo/John Locher/File)

Sacramento (California): California is adopting nearly two dozen laws aimed at preventing and fighting the devastating wildfires that have charred large swaths of the state in recent years and killed scores of people.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Wednesday that he had signed the 22 bills, saying several also will help the state meet its clean energy goals.

The measures largely enact key recommendations from a June report by a governor's task force and build on \$1 billion in the state budget devoted to preparing for wildfires and other emergencies, Newsom said.

Newsom signed the legislation as the state approaches the anniversary of the wildfire that killed 85 people and largely leveled the Northern California town of Paradise last November.

It's just short of the second anniversary of the firestorms that raced through the wine country counties north and east of San Francisco, noted state Sen. Mike McGuire, a Democrat representing Healdsburg in the affected areas. But he said the state is learning from its mistakes.

The fires changed the lives of tens of thousands of Californians, but the losses of lives and property "should not go in vain," McGuire said in a statement. "We have a new normal in California and our state is stepping up."

Several bills encourage communities to adopt standards for making homes and their surroundings more fire resistant. One requires state officials to work with communities in high-risk areas to create a retrofit program to update homes built prior to stricter building codes in 2008.

Others address the precautionary power shutoffs that utilities have begun using more frequently to ease the risk of blazes sparked by electric lines, which have ignited some of California's deadliest wildfires in recent years. One, for instance, will help low-income people receive backup power if they rely on life support equipment.

Some increase state regulation of utilities' wildfire prevention efforts. One of those bills requires an independent third-party to verify the clearing of vegetation from utility lines.

Others try to safeguard and streamline communications systems including those used to notify millions of Californians during disasters. Another bill creates the California Wildfire Warning Center, a network of automated weather and environmental monitoring stations that will help officials forecast bad fire weather and better assess the threat.

"Given the realities of climate change and extreme weather events, the work is not done, but these bills represent important steps forward on prevention, community resilience and utility oversight," Newsom said in a statement.

Fire officials have blamed global warming for a longer, drier wildfire season that now stretches virtually year-round in

parts of the state. Newsom called climate change “a core driver of heightened wildfire risk” and said five of the bills he signed, including one with incentives for using storage batteries, will help California keep its role as a clean energy leader.

Several of those bills increase utility regulation by the California Public Utility Commission, while another sets requirements for additional utility safety reviews by the commission.

Earlier this year, Newsom signed a law requiring California’s three investor-owned utilities to spend a combined \$5 billion on safety improvements and standards. That measure also sets up a \$21 billion fund that the companies and utility customers pay into that can be tapped to help pay victims of future wildfires.

On Wednesday the Democratic governor vetoed a bill by Republican Assemblyman Jay Obernolte of Big Bear Lake that would have eased the state’s strict environmental laws when building fire safety routes, saying the measure is premature and could bring unintended consequences.

Newsom said he would need better information on the number, location and potential impacts of future fire safety road construction projects.

- AP