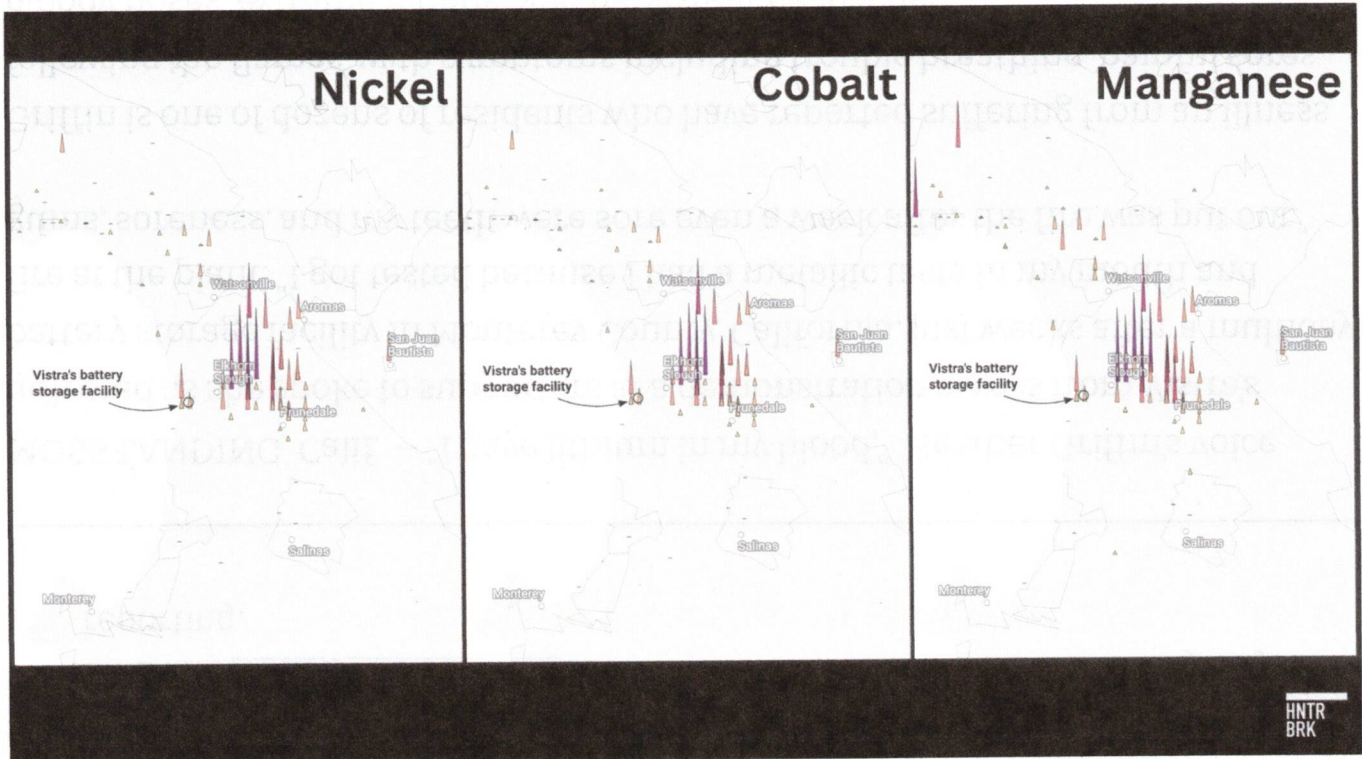


# BREAKING: NEW DATA INDICATES ELEVATED HEAVY METAL AFTER VISTRA FIRE



FEB 11, 2025 5:55 PM EST

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- Surface sample testing conducted by a grassroots community response group shows elevated heavy metal concentrations near Vistra Corp.'s (NYSE: \$VST) battery storage facility in Moss Landing, California, after a lithium-ion battery fire burned for several days.
- A Hunterbrook analysis of the testing data shows that samples taken within 20 miles of Vistra's Moss Landing facility on average have nickel and cobalt concentrations that are about 34 times higher than the levels found in samples collected further away from the plant.
- Preliminary [soil test](#) results published by Monterey County also show cobalt concentrations [above screening levels](#) for all selected testing sites. San José State University researchers [had already found](#) "unusually high concentrations" of nickel, manganese, and cobalt in marsh soil at a nearby estuary.

review when it considered Vistra's application to build the Moss Landing battery energy storage facility in 2019.

- More than three weeks after the fire, residents are still reporting health issues, including headaches, respiratory issues, and fatigue.
- When asked about the community surface sample tests, Vistra did not respond. On its [incident response website](#), the company acknowledged the preliminary soil test results published by Monterey County, stating: "More sampling is needed to understand how the results compare to relevant screening levels."

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MOSS LANDING, Calif. — "I have lithium in my blood," Heather Griffin's voice quivered as she spoke to supporters at a demonstration across from Vistra's battery storage facility in Monterey County, California, just weeks after a multiday fire at the plant. "I got tested because I had a metallic taste in my mouth and gums, soreness, and my teeth were sore even a week after the fire was put out."

Griffin is one of dozens of residents who have reported suffering from an illness following the flames, with symptoms including trouble breathing, painful sores, bloody noses, extreme fatigue, and persistent headaches.

For some residents with preexisting conditions, such as asthma or COPD, conditions have worsened.

On Saturday morning, members of the community organized a demonstration under the banner of a new grassroots group: Never Again Moss Landing. The

efforts to collect facts so that the January 16 fire, the second in three years after a fire at PG&E's battery facility [in 2022](#), is the last.

The group has also decided to supplement testing efforts by Monterey County and take matters into their own hands: On the weekend after the fire had apparently burned itself out, volunteers collected 124 surface wipe samples throughout the Monterey Bay area, swabbing everything from patio tables to solar panels to hot tub covers.

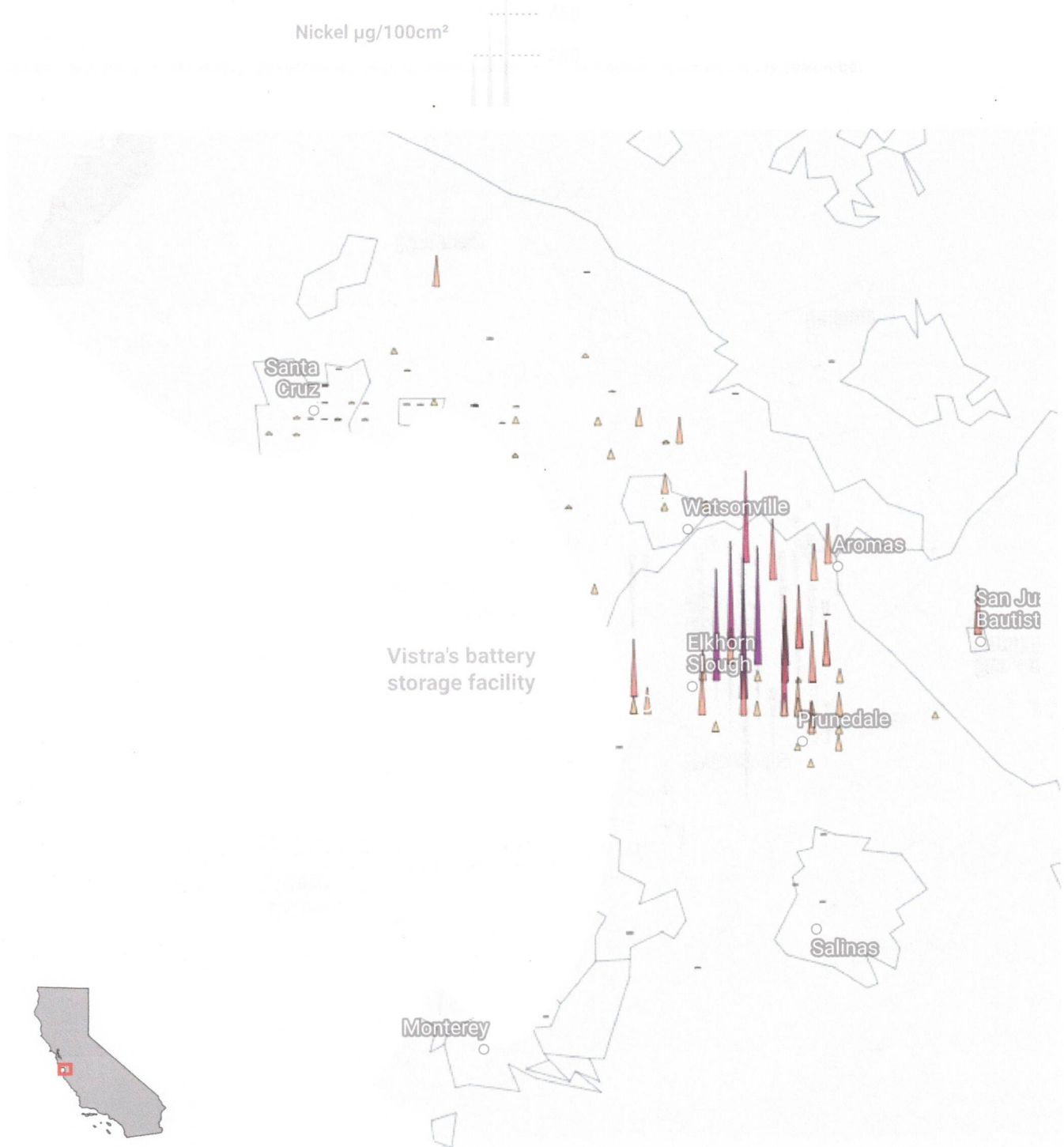


Never Again Moss Landing, a group of residents who conducted independent soil and water testing, rallied outside Vistra's battery storage facility on February 8, 2025, in Moss Landing, Calif. Source: Ruth Dusseault/Bay City News

## Data analysis reveals elevated heavy metal concentrations following path of plume

The samples were shipped to an independent laboratory in Utah for analysis and

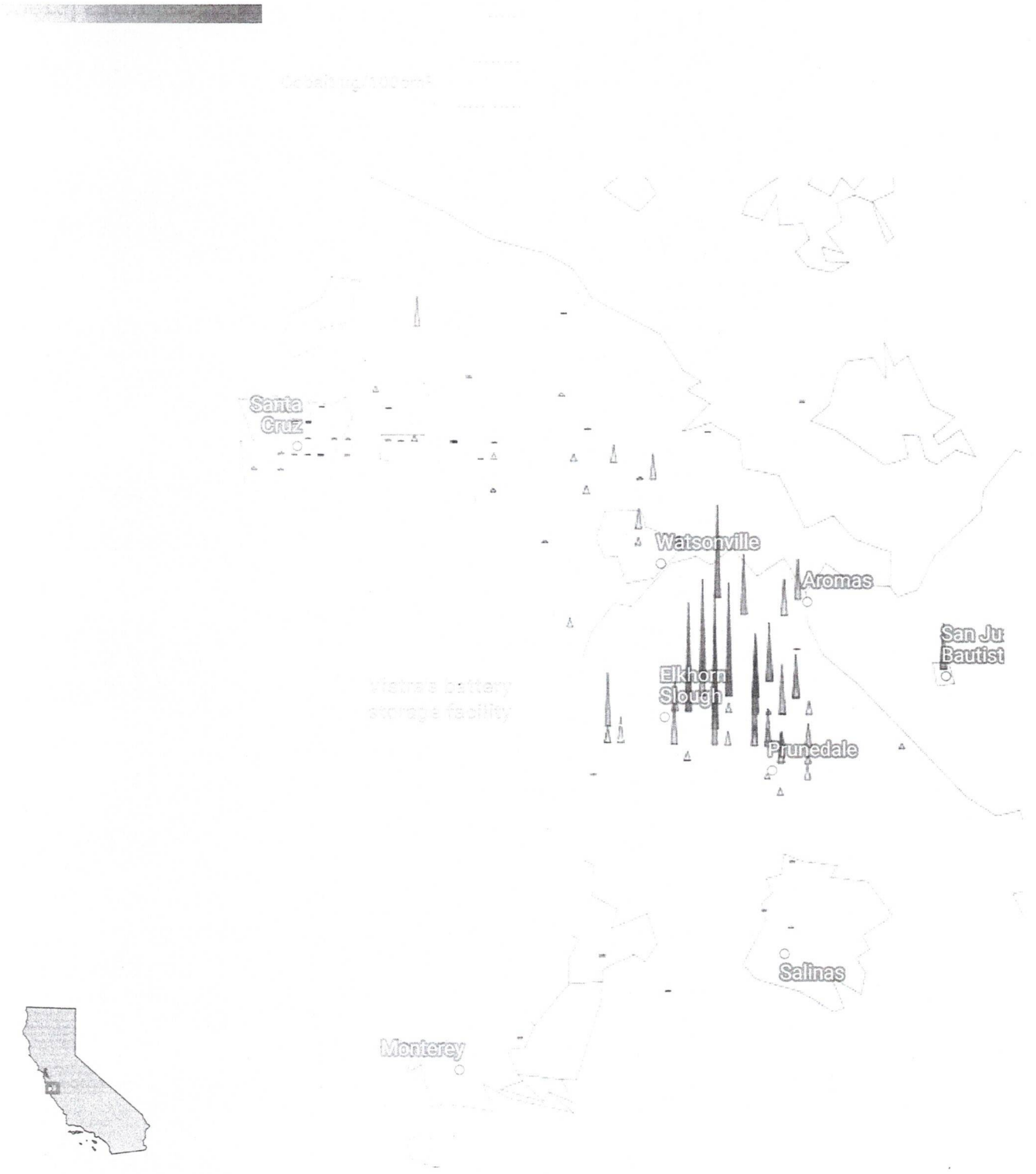
A Hunterbrook analysis of the testing data shows that samples taken within 20 miles of Vistra's Moss Landing facility on average have nickel and cobalt concentrations that are about 34 times higher than the levels found in samples collected further away from the plant.



Source: BioMax Environmental / Surface sample tests conducted by local residents • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Several samples close to the facility showed elevated nickel and cobalt concentrations more than 180 times higher than the average levels more than 20 miles away.

# Cobalt Concentration Near Vistra's Battery Storage Facility



Source: BioMax Environmental / Surface sample tests conducted by local residents • Created with **Datavrapper**

Hunterbrook’s data visualizations show that nickel, cobalt, and manganese levels are mostly elevated east and northeast of the Vistra facility, which matches

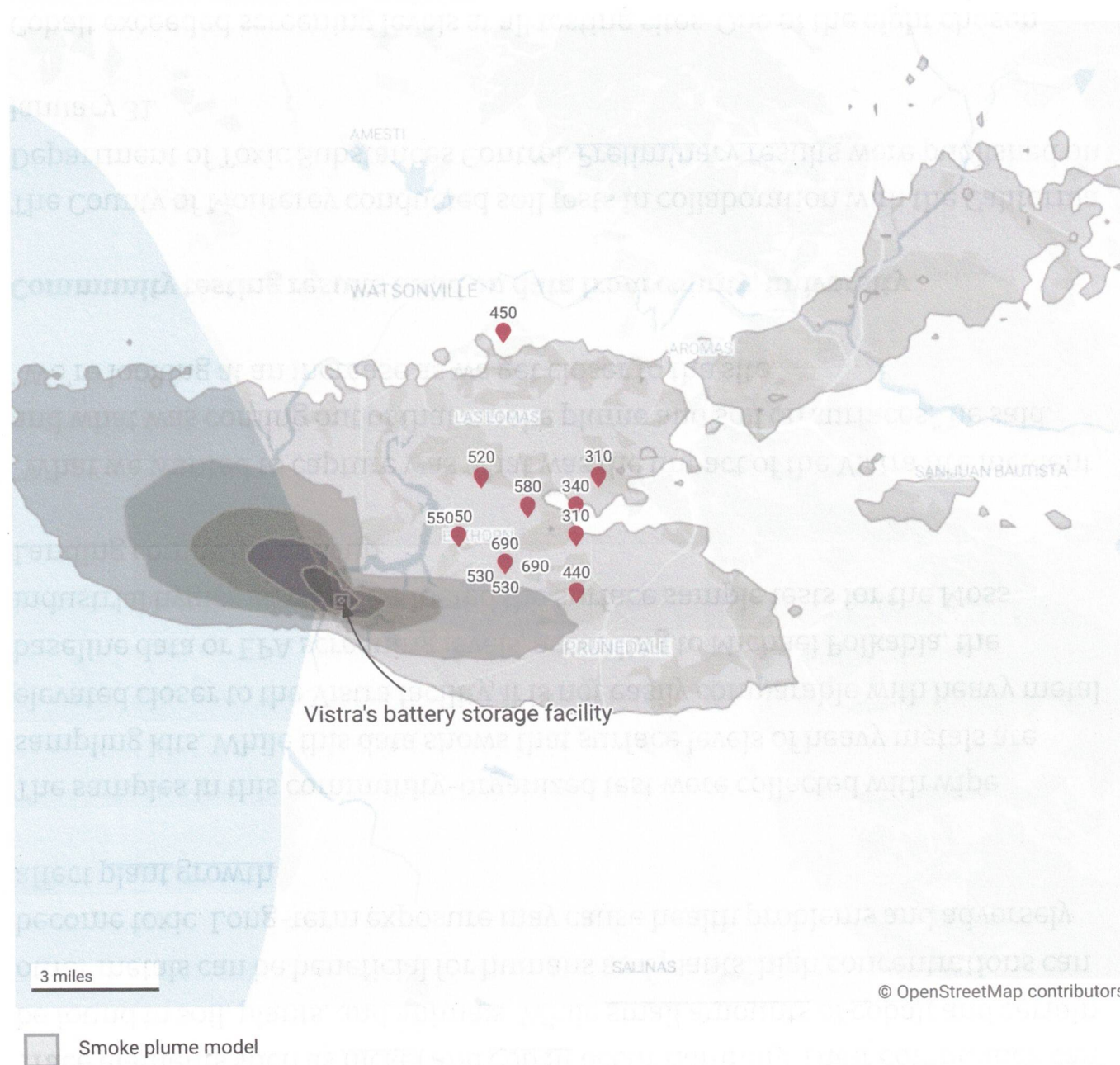
direction — suggesting a connection between higher heavy metal concentrations and the fire.

## Highest Heavy Metal Concentrations

Measured in  $\mu\text{g}/100\text{cm}^2$

Click on the buttons below to switch between metals:

Nickel Cobalt Manganese Lithium



Source: BioMax Environmental / Surface sample tests conducted by local residents | Peter Weiss-Penzias with NOAA HYSPLIT Dispersion Model • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

All of the highest concentrations for nickel, cobalt, manganese, and lithium — with the exception of one sample with elevated manganese levels in the Santa

Roughly 25,000 people live in the area covered by the smoke plume model.

Trace elements such as [nickel](#) and [cobalt](#) occur naturally. Their compounds can be found in soil, plants, and animals. While [small amounts of cobalt](#) and certain other metals can be beneficial for humans and plants, high concentrations can become toxic. Long-term exposure may cause health problems and adversely affect [plant growth](#).

The samples in this community-organized test were collected with wipe sampling kits. While this data shows that surface levels of heavy metals are elevated closer to the Vistra facility, it is not easily comparable with heavy metal baseline data or EPA screening levels, according to Michael Polkabila, the industrial hygienist who conducted the surface sample tests for the Moss Landing community group.

“What we wanted to capture was what was the impact of the Vistra fire incident and what was coming out of that smoke plume and soil on surfaces,” he said. “We're looking at an increase as we get closer to the site.”

### **Community testing results build on data from county, university**

The County of Monterey conducted soil tests in collaboration with the California Department of Toxic Substances Control. [Preliminary results](#) were published on January 31.

Cobalt exceeded screening levels at all testing sites. One of the eight chosen testing sites [exceeded screening levels](#) for nickel, manganese, and copper, in addition to cobalt. It is located northeast of the Vistra facility, where the smoke plume moved. The County emphasized that the data has not been fully analyzed or validated and is not conclusive.

When asked about the community surface sample tests, Vistra did not respond.

On its [incident response website](#), the company acknowledged the soil test results published by Monterey County, stating: “These are preliminary test results that

levels.”

Vistra also said that it is conducting its own soil sample tests with a third-party contractor. So far, however, Vistra does not appear to have published the results.

The community and county test results add to other scientific evidence suggesting that the fire at Vistra’s facility may have caused elevated heavy metal concentrations in the surrounding areas. After the fire, San José State University researchers [found](#) unusually high concentrations of nickel, manganese, and cobalt in marsh soil at a nearby estuary.



Cleanup crews and vehicles are in place at the Vistra Moss Landing battery storage facility on February 8, 2025, at Moss Landing, Calif. Source: Ruth Dusseault/Bay City News

## Documents reveal Vistra avoided environmental review

considered Vistra's application to build the Moss Landing battery storage facility in 2019, stating that there was "no substantial evidence that the proposed project as designed, conditioned and mitigated will have a significant effect on the environment."

In the [May 2019 meeting](#) commission meeting where it voted to waive the review, the commission did not discuss a fire at the Vistra facility and its potential environmental impact. The application included a fire safety plan, which the local North County Fire Protection District reviewed and deemed acceptable.

The plan at the time of the application did not account for a multiday fire at the facility. An [emergency response plan](#) from 2023 that Vistra posted on its incident response site assumed the "worst case" scenario to be a fire extinguished after 30 minutes.

Hunterbrook obtained a letter that the Monterey County Board of Supervisors sent to Vistra and PG&E, which operates an adjacent battery storage facility, in the aftermath of the January 16 fire. In the letter, the board requests that both companies develop emergency response plans that include a "catastrophic worst case scenario" defined as a "full conflagration" of the facilities.

"The approval of both Vistra and PG&E's battery facilities never received the fullest review and robust public discussion that they deserved," wrote Glenn Church, supervisor for Monterey County District 2, in [a blog post](#) about the Moss Landing fire. "They were promoted as a great step forward for our energy future. The downside was never properly vetted."

The Vistra facility is based in the Salinas Valley, an area also known as "America's Salad Bowl." It produces 70% of the lettuce grown in California, as well as other fruits and vegetables, including broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, strawberries, tomatoes, grapes, and artichokes.

According to the Monterey County Farm Bureau's [2023 crop report](#), the region produces vegetables and fruits with a gross production value of about \$4.3

Because it's winter, there were few crops in fields at the time of the fire, according to the Farm Bureau.

"[Agricultural] Associations are working to assess any impacts and ensure that crops, farmworkers, and consumers are safe," Norm Groot, the Farm Bureau's Executive Director, wrote in an email to Hunterbrook. "It should be noted that 'heavy metals' such as those involved in the emissions from this fire are elements commonly found as natural plant micronutrients. Experts do not anticipate significant plant uptake or toxicity concerns based on current soil pH levels and organic matter composition."

### **New regulations may follow the fire**

Rules for approving battery storage facilities may become stricter in California in reaction to the fire.

California Assemblymember Dawn Addis [introduced a bill](#) that would return approval authority over battery energy storage facilities back to local communities, closing an [authorization bypass](#) through California's Energy Commission. It would also require facilities to be built at least 3,200 feet away from homes, schools, and hospitals.

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) also [proposed new safety standards](#) for battery facilities that would "increase oversight over emergency response action plans" and establish "technical logbook standards." The proposal will be voted on at a CPUC meeting on March 13. The CPUC's Safety and Enforcement Division has started an investigation of Vistra's facility, "requesting information and updates" from the company.

### **Residents say they continue to suffer**

More than three weeks after the fire, local residents told Hunterbrook they are still experiencing health issues. And many of them are frustrated with Vistra's and county officials' responses.

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power storage facility fire. The most common symptoms reported included “eye, nose, and throat irritation; metallic taste or smell; and exacerbation of chronic respiratory problems like asthma.”

Marcy Castro had a bad feeling when her daughter returned to elementary school, three days after the fire apparently had burned itself out.

They both had experienced intense headaches and fatigue during and after the fire, and the school is only five miles from the facility. She asked the school’s office staff and the principal about possible health impacts from the fire and protocols for cleaning the playground from debris that may have traveled from the burning battery facility. “Clueless’ I guess is a good word,” she said. “They’re all kind of clueless about what should be done.”

When she picked her daughter up from school, she noticed a peculiar — but somewhat familiar — taste.

“I notice that for a few hours afterwards I’m having that weird taste on the tip of my tongue like I’ve been testing batteries all day,” she says. “Like you know we were kids and you tested the square batteries and you’d have that weird taste and feeling on the tip of your tongue. I get that when I go over there.”

After she heard that her daughter’s class was running laps outside in gym class, she decided to keep her home, fearing exposure to the air near the facility could impact her health.

Like many of the residents Hunterbrook spoke with, Sherry Okamoto has been navigating persisting symptoms in the aftermath of the fire. What began as headaches turned into a hard time breathing, nausea, wheezing, and rashes. Okamoto, who said she struggles with autoimmune disorders, has relied on respiratory support since the fire.

“When things hit me, it hits me hard,” she said, and added, “I’m lucky I have my breathing machines.”

duck pool is covered in an oily film. She is concerned her homegrown produce and eggs might be contaminated.

"I'm not going to give it to my kids," she said. So she pulled up her whole garden.

Okamoto feels left behind. "Nobody will answer us," she lamented after detailing a lack of support and information from Vistra and the state government.

Stephanie, who is using a pseudonym because she doesn't want her name published, is in a similarly difficult position. The sole caretaker for her 77-year-old husband, who has Parkinson's, her past few weeks have been marked by extreme anxiety and stress. "I've never been this scared in my life," she said. "My husband doesn't breathe well. He has a compromised system ... I worry about him."

Stephanie told Hunterbrook she and her husband never got evacuation warnings or information about air contamination. "No one was looking out for us," she said. And when the EPA released [a statement](#) informing residents that the air posed no risk to public health, Stephanie mentioned she did not believe it. "We feel that we were ignored."

Shiree Ames Goins and her husband were living about seven miles from the Vistra plant at the time of the fire. She described a series of cascading symptoms that first night — headaches, nausea, a chemical taste in her mouth, and eventually, a heavy feeling in her chest and belabored breathing.

After speaking on the phone with her doctor, she and her husband knew they had to leave the area. She told Hunterbrook they rented an Airbnb north of their home for about two weeks. While their symptoms persisted because the plume from the fire had also traveled north, they found that their symptoms became less intense the farther they got from home.

When they returned to their home, her symptoms came back. She now worries her home will not be livable, and she will be unable to sell it to someone else in good conscience. "We could end up being homeless."

And she said she has had very little guidance or support from elected officials or Vistra: “I would have never dreamt in Monterey County that this would not only happen but have such an underwhelming response.”



Brian Roeder, facilitator of Never Again Moss Landing, speaks at a rally across the street from the Vistra Moss Landing battery storage facility on February 8, 2025, in Moss Landing, Calif. Source: Ruth Dusseault/Bay City News

“The doctors and the labs don't know what to do,” said Brian Roeder, a community facilitator for Never Again Moss Landing. Roeder said he spent \$2,700 of his own money to help pay for the volunteer’s test kits.

Jill Amos, whose work as a realtor requires her to be outside a lot, has struggled to get heavy metals blood testing done with her doctor. “No one is prepared, not even our medical facilities,” she told Hunterbrook.

Goins also had difficulty getting heavy metals testing done, and she recalled her doctor telling her that her symptoms might be from anxiety. “You have to prove to people that you’re sick. They think it’s in your head.”

coming. Look, guys, you need to tell the labs and the doctors: A) People are going to come in. B) Something did happen. This is a test they need. This is how they can get it, right. And we'd like to know the results. And none of that's happened because I think they're expecting the feds and the state to come in and do that. And they haven't. The EPA left, and that was it. The fire is out. We're gone. Nothing happened. Nothing to see."

## Authors

**Till Daldrup** joined Hunterbrook from The Wall Street Journal, where he focused on open-source investigations and content verification. In 2023, he was part of a team of reporters who won a Gerald Loeb Award for an investigation that revealed how Russia is stealing grain from occupied parts of Ukraine. He has an M.A. in Journalism from New York University and a B.S. in Social Sciences from University of Cologne. He's also an alum of the Cologne School of Journalism (Kölner Journalistenschule). Till is based in New York.

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