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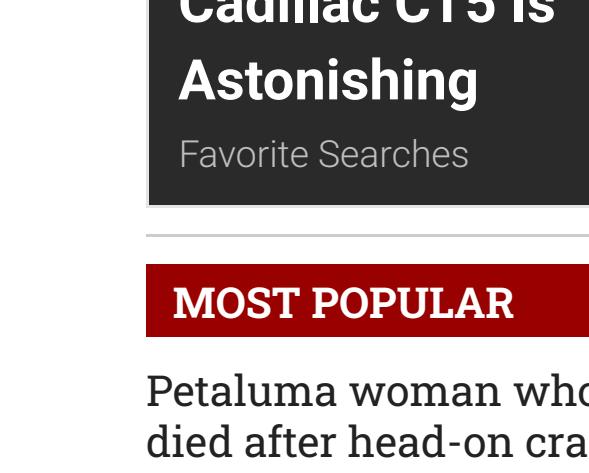
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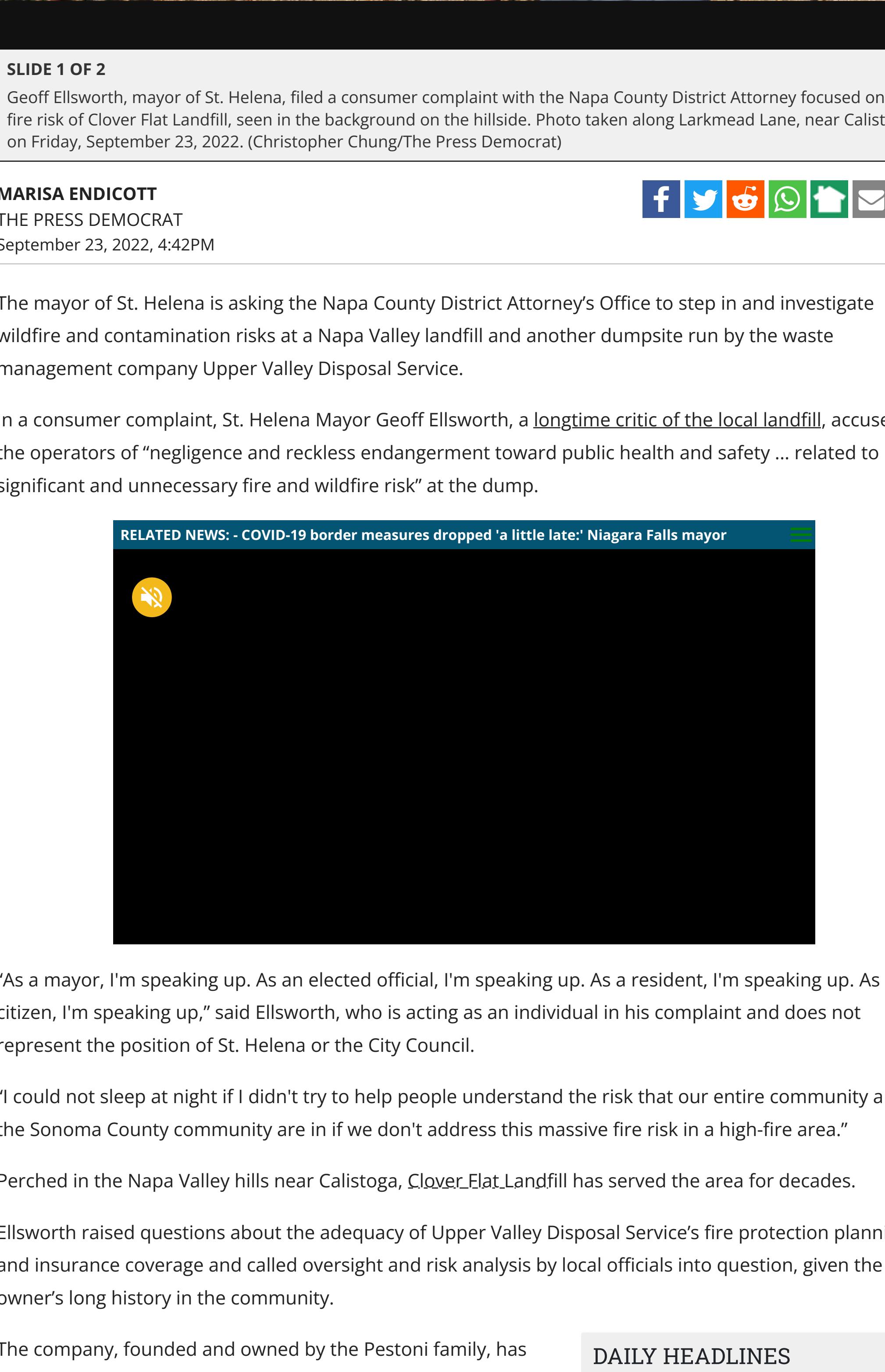


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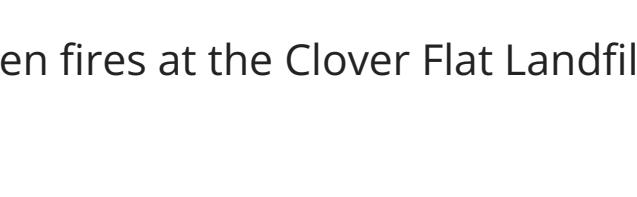
## St. Helena mayor alleges wildfire and contamination risks at Napa Valley landfill



SLIDE 1 OF 2

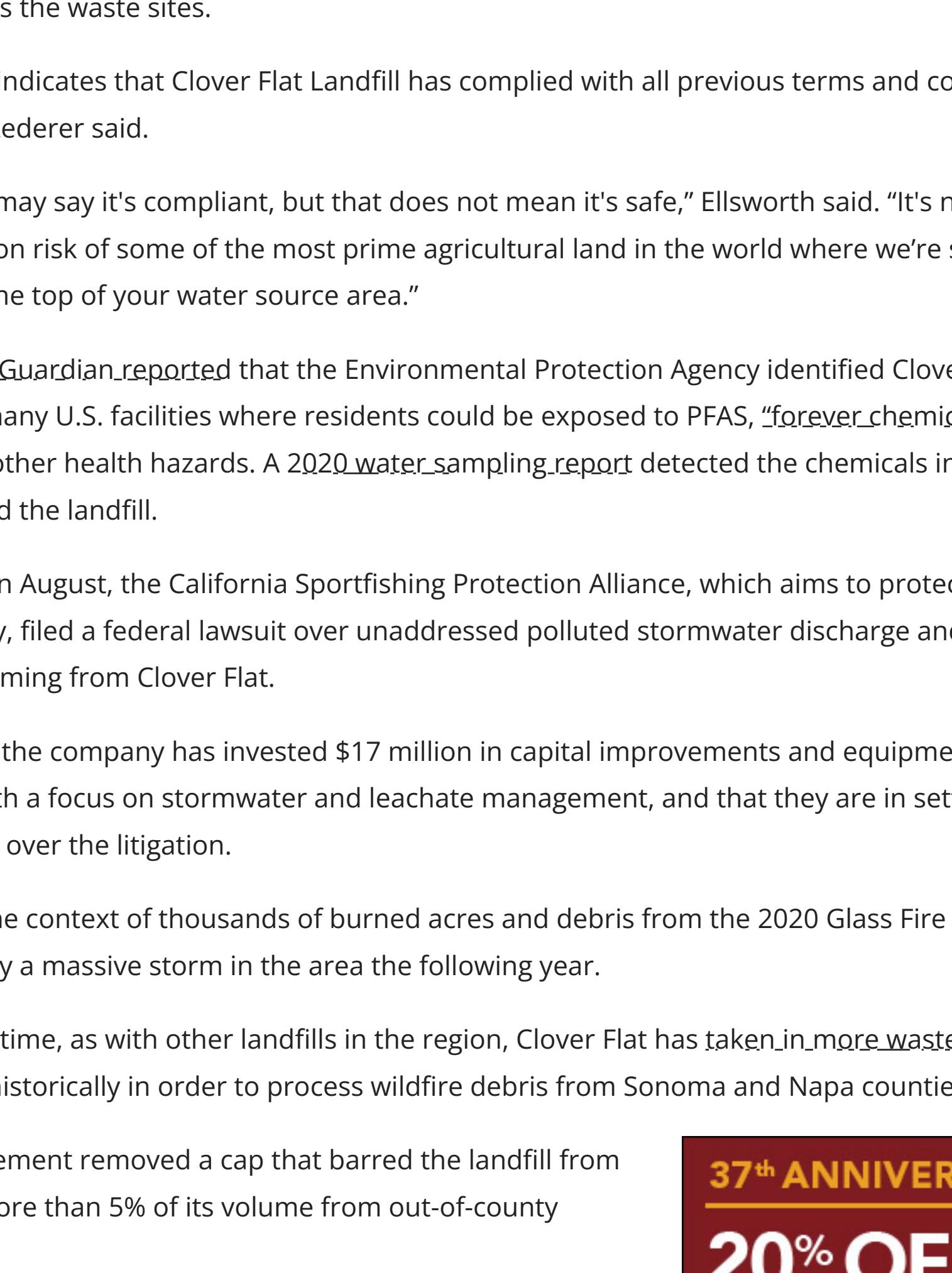
Geoff Ellsworth, mayor of St. Helena, filed a consumer complaint with the Napa County District Attorney focused on the fire risk of Clover Flat Landfill, seen in the background on the hillsides. Photo taken along Larkmead Lane, near Calistoga, on Friday, September 23, 2022. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat)

MARISA ENDICOTT  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT  
September 23, 2022, 4:42PM



The mayor of St. Helena is asking the Napa County District Attorney's Office to step in and investigate wildfire and contamination risks at a Napa Valley landfill and another dumpsite run by the waste management company Upper Valley Disposal Service.

In a consumer complaint, St. Helena Mayor Geoff Ellsworth, a [longtime critic of the local landfill](#), accused the operators of "negligence and reckless endangerment toward public health and safety ... related to significant and unnecessary fire and wildfire risk" at the dump.



"As a mayor, I'm speaking up. As an elected official, I'm speaking up. As a resident, I'm speaking up. As a citizen, I'm speaking up," said Ellsworth, who is acting as an individual in his complaint and does not represent the position of St. Helena or the City Council.

"I could not sleep at night if I didn't try to help people understand the risk that our entire community and the Sonoma County community are in if we don't address this massive fire risk in a high-fire area."

Perched in the Napa Valley hills near Calistoga, [Clover Flat Landfill](#) has served the area for decades.

Ellsworth raised questions about the adequacy of Upper Valley Disposal Service's fire protection planning and insurance coverage and called oversight and risk analysis by local officials into question, given the owner's long history in the community.

The company, founded and owned by the Pestoni family, has long-term exclusive contracts to serve the area.

"It's a one-family monopoly company that's existed for 60 years with a list of problems in a vulnerable area," Ellsworth told me, "and yet, we continue to allow it without even considering a change."

Patrick Collins, deputy district attorney for Napa County, said the office was "currently reviewing the allegations" but could not comment further.

Between 2013 and 2018, the fire department responded to over a dozen fires at the Clover Flat Landfill, according to Ellsworth's complaint.

Repeated violations, including insufficient on-site firefighting resources during a 2018 fire and the leakage of contaminated runoff into a creek flowing to the Napa River, [put the landfill's contract at risk in 2019](#).

The allegations "have no merit," Christy Pestoni, chief operating officer for Upper Valley Disposal Service, said in a statement to The Press Democrat.

She said no fire has originated at the landfill since 2018. This summer, a recycling vehicle's load caught fire due to a lithium battery, though it was extinguished without incident.

A new fire suppression system approved by the Napa County Fire Marshall was installed in 2020.

"As the only local source for the disposal and management of vineyard, household and other waste generated by the community, it is a vital part of the region's critical infrastructure," Pestoni said.

The county, along with other local and state agencies, recently performed a compliance check of the landfill, according to Steven Lederer, manager of the Upper Valley Waste Management Agency, the body that oversees the waste sites.

"The review indicates that Clover Flat Landfill has complied with all previous terms and corrected all violations," Lederer said.

"Somebody may say it's compliant, but that does not mean it's safe," Ellsworth said. "It's not just fire risk. It's contamination risk of some of the most prime agricultural land in the world where we're stockpiling garbage at the top of your water source area."

In 2021, [the Guardian reported](#) that the Environmental Protection Agency identified Clover Flat Landfill as one of the many U.S. facilities where residents could be exposed to PFAS, "forever chemicals" linked to cancer and other health hazards. A [2020 water sampling report](#) detected the chemicals in every sample taken around the landfill.

Separately, in August, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, which aims to protect fisheries and water quality, filed a federal lawsuit over unaddressed polluted stormwater discharge and Clean Water Act violations coming from Clover Flat.

Pestoni said the company has invested \$17 million in capital improvements and equipment over the past 3 1/2 years with a focus on stormwater and leachate management, and that they are in settlement negotiations over the litigation.

She noted the context of thousands of burned acres and debris from the 2020 Glass Fire flushed through the landfill by a massive storm in the area the following year.

At the same time, as with other landfills in the region, Clover Flat has taken in more waste in recent years than it had historically in order to process wildfire debris from Sonoma and Napa counties.

A 2020 agreement removed a cap that barred the landfill from accepting more than 5% of its volume from out-of-county sources.

Lederer said the quota hasn't been exceeded and is unlikely to give the landfill's inconvenient location for other counties and a higher gate fee. He said, too, that fire debris doesn't add additional risk, although when faced with sanctions in 2019, [Clover Flat's general manager cited extra intake from the 2017 wildfires as one of several reasons for its breaches](#).

The landfill will also be expanding its commercial composting program.

Setting aside any concerns specific to Upper Valley Disposal Service, the complaint at its core speaks to the broader and thornier questions of weighing risk for booming communities in areas faced with ever-accelerating climate threats.

For Ellsworth, the Glass Fire, where his "city was burning on three sides," was a sobering experience.

"I want to do everything possible to make sure that never happens again, and that means diminishing risk wherever we can," he told me.

"This landfill is in proximity to tens of thousands of people in Napa County, and just over the hill in Santa Rosa, well over 100,000 people. If a fire gets out of control, we can have a disaster."

*"In Your Corner"* is a new column that puts watchdog reporting to work for the community. If you have a concern, a tip, or a hunch, you can reach *"In Your Corner"* Columnist Marisa Endicott at 707-521-5470 or [marisa.endicott@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:marisa.endicott@pressdemocrat.com). On Twitter @InYourCornerTPD and Facebook @InYourCornerTPD.

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