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As Communities Rebuild, The Right Infrastructure is Necessary for Health & Safety

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It's an unfortunate part of life in Northern California that many families have bags packed ready for a fast escape from wildfires. What's not expected, though, is that infrastructure critical to the health and safety of communities melts in those fires and contaminates the water supply.

But that's the compounded tragedy for places like Fountaingrove in Santa Rosa where the cleanup and rebuilding process will take even longer than initially thought now that benzene—a cancer-causing chemical that leached from burning PVC pipes—has been found in the local water system. It turns out that as the PVC water pipes melted during the wildfire, benzene was released into the water system, leading to a newly restricted area around Fountaingrove in an attempt to contain the spread of benzene. For many, this means that remaining in Fountaingrove will not be an option as the now-doubled time frame to rebuild will be too costly, and the concerns surrounding the contaminated water system remain.

Questions about the chemicals that are used to make PVC pipes are not new. Whether it is local leaders reviewing the pipes that carry drinking water to homes, schools, and hospitals, or major corporations such as Apple discontinuing the use of PVC in its products, the PVC industry still has many unanswered questions regarding the chemicals they use in their product. With the news about benzene leaching into the water system in Fountaingrove, those unanswered questions surrounding the safety of PVC are only being further highlighted.

This is not an attempt to castigate blame on anyone for the decision to use PVC pipes when they were installed many years ago in our service lines and water mains. Those of us who live in California know that wildfires are a legitimate threat as a natural disaster, and the damage that was caused last year is beyond what many of us could have imagined. However, knowing what we know now about the failure of PVC pipes last year, our communities must look to make smart decisions about rebuilding our communities for the future.

As Santa Rosa is leaning the expensive way, the melted plastic pipes could wind up costing them \$43 million to rebuild their infrastructure plus the cost of installing a filtering system in the interim.

The pipes that Santa Rosa—and any other communities needing to replace their water systems—eventually chooses to use to rebuild should be resilient in the face of another natural disaster. With what is happening in Fountaingrove, we cannot risk having pipes fail or, worse yet, melt and leach chemicals into our water systems. Doing so only risks a longer, more unnecessary rebuilding process and will once again add fear and concern in the minds of residents who are trying to piece their lives back together.

As Northern California communities look to rebuild their water systems, local leaders should try every conceivable way to learn from the past so that they can ensure their residents that the pipes transporting their drinking water are safe and reliable both for now and in the future.

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