

*04/02/2026 Sonoma Valley Sun on SDC maintenance*

*Is the Fire Next Time Waiting to Happen?*



**SDC Fuel Load Grows Rapidly But Who Will Cut It Down**  
By David Bolling

One year ago – in April of 2025 – the California Department of General Services (DGS) announced it would soon cease funding the “warm shutdown” of the Sonoma Developmental Center’s 180-acre campus in Glen Ellen.

The “warm shutdown” was understood to include a private security force to patrol the property, basic maintenance of the grounds, and oversight of the water and power resources to preserve some degree of functionality.

And that’s what happened on June 30 of last year. In the intervening months, power appears to have been cut to buildings with below-grade sump pumps, despite several heavy rain storms. The result has been flooded basements that

exposed flood waters to asbestos contamination from the thermal insulation used to cover hot water and steam pipes in those basements. Most of that infrastructure damage is below ground level and out of sight. And the unspoken assumption on the part of both state and county officials appears to be that, since some 90 percent of the entire campus will be razed and removed (at least according to the original plans submitted by the state's selected developer), any pre-demolition damage is of no consequence.

Meanwhile, a much more visible effect of the warm shutdown is raising increasing concern among members of the surrounding Glen Ellen community. That's because of the lush growth of tall grasses and weeds, frequently surrounding a growing accumulation of fallen branches, dead and dying trees, and other potential fuel, all of which poses a growing risk of feeding another wildfire, like the one that ravaged the community in 2017.

In some places stands of wild grasses have grown to five and six feet tall, a level of growth rarely if ever seen in previous years when regular mowing eliminated the threat. But this year there has been no mowing, and if those grasses are allowed stand and dry, they will pose an open invitation for fire.

That possibility alarmed Glen Ellen resident Sharon Church, who wrote a letter of concern to First District County Supervisor Rebecca Hermosilla, Fourth Assembly District Member Damon Connolly, and Third State Senate District Senator Christopher Cabaldon. Church's letter explained that she had reached out to the Fire Marshall for the Sonoma County Fire District, but was told that "nothing could be done by the County because the State owns the property."

Her letter asks all of the elected office holders with jurisdiction over SDC to "find a solution so the problem can be rectified quickly."

That request may be complicated by the fact that Sonoma County has not budgeted to provide maintenance on property belonging to the State, and the State of California adopted legislation to fund protection and maintenance through a three-year planning period that has long-since expired.

Meanwhile a citizen lawsuit, filed by Sonoma Next 100 and alleging several failures by the State to follow legislative mandates for the property, was upheld in Sonoma County Superior Court on March 11. The lawsuit claims DGS violated the terms of the legislation adopted to guide the disposition of the property, including the requirement that the property must be maintained by the state until it is transferred to a developer. The court decision does not resolve the issues in the Sonoma Next 100 suit, but it finds the suit has sufficient grounds to proceed to trial. How soon that can happen is unclear, but it will almost certainly not be resolved before the approaching fire season is upon us.

Long range, AI-aided Sonoma forecasts predict that April and May will drier than normal, that the summer season will be hotter and drier than normal, with high heat in June and August. The Nuns fire, which roared through Glen Ellen on October 8, 2017, destroyed more than 400 homes, a total of 1,355 structures and charred 56,000 acres. It also forced the emergency evacuation of every resident from the SDC campus.

A response from DGS about what actions the State plans to take to resolve the threat could not be secured by press time, but the *Sun* will continue to track this issue, in print and online until the situation is resolved. Meanwhile, the State continues to fund a skeleton private security force who periodically patrol the property, but no apparent maintenance is taking place, except the weed whacking which the California Conservation Corps has been doing on the Lake Suttonfield dam, despite the growing presence of broken windows and unlocked doors providing access to some buildings, and the tall, tall grass.