



## Meeting Summary: CalEPA – Post-Fire Environmental Concerns

**Date:** May 6, 2025

### Attendees:

- **Anna Naimark**, Deputy Secretary & Special Counsel for Water Policy, CalEPA
  - Absent
- **Ana Jovel Melendez**, Deputy Secretary for Legislative Affairs, CalEPA
- **Ashley Oelsen**, Biologist

**Duration:** ~49 minutes

**Topics Covered:** Fire recovery, environmental testing, jurisdictional gaps, community safety, and wildlife health

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### Attendee Biographies

#### **Anna Naimark**

*Deputy Secretary & Special Counsel for Water Policy, CalEPA*

Anna Naimark has served as CalEPA's Deputy Secretary and Special Counsel for Water Policy since February 2022. In this role, she leads water-related regulatory strategy and legal counsel for the agency, working closely with state water boards, public health agencies, and federal partners. Anna has a legal background and has worked extensively on environmental policy and interagency coordination throughout her public service career.

#### **Ana Jovel Melendez**

*Deputy Secretary for Legislative Affairs, CalEPA*

Ana Jovel Melendez was appointed Deputy Secretary for Legislative Affairs in 2024 after serving in a similar role at the California State Water Resources Control Board from 2021–2024. She is responsible for CalEPA's legislative strategy and liaising with the California State Legislature. Ana brings a strong background in environmental law, policy negotiation, and legislative advocacy, making her a key voice in shaping California's environmental priorities at the state level.

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## Key Discussion Themes

### 1. Jurisdictional Confusion and Responsibility

- Ashley Oelsen highlighted widespread **community confusion** over which agencies are responsible for beach and fire debris cleanup.
- CalEPA clarified that **emergency response begins at the local level**, escalating to state and federal agencies through Office of Emergency Services (OES) channels.
- **Local LA County Public Health and Water Boards** are tasked with decisions on beach advisories, while testing is often initiated by regional boards.

### 2. Environmental Testing Concerns

- Initial promises of **ongoing testing through 2025** have been scaled back to one final round in May due to **lack of funding**.
- Ashley questioned why the **State has not stepped in** after FEMA and EPA declined further residential testing—unlike previous wildfire responses.
- Specific concerns were raised about:
  - **Lead and arsenic levels** in beach sand and storm drains.
  - **Lack of signage** around storm drains where children play.
  - **Inconsistent definitions of background levels** and reliance on mixed thresholds for public safety.

### 3. Wildlife Die-Off and Ecosystem Health

- Ashley documented significant **wildlife deaths**, including dolphins and birds, possibly tied to **harmful algal blooms (HABs)** and post-fire contamination.
- CalEPA acknowledged concerns but noted **direct scientific correlation is difficult** and may take years.
- Ashley cited **previous post-fire reports (Camp and Woolsey fires)** that anticipated HABs as a fire-related water quality impact—urging the State to act on these lessons.

### 4. Community Impact and Trauma

- Residents feel **gaslit, unsafe, and uninformed** about health risks.

- Ashley described firsthand observations: **burn debris reused by children**, residents draining ash-laden pool water into storm drains, and continued **inadequate remediation of fire debris on beaches**.
- She also emphasized the **psychological toll** on families and volunteers trying to fill information gaps without agency support.

## 5. Requests and Recommendations

Ashley called for:

- **Clarity on agency responsibilities**, especially regarding underwater debris and sand remediation.
- **State-supported environmental testing**, especially where federal support is lacking.
- **Expanded public communication and transparency**, particularly about health advisories and test interpretation.
- Better coordination between **EPA, FEMA, Army Corps, and state/county departments**.
- Engagement with **legislators and state agencies** to push for dedicated funding and systemic reforms.

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## Key Follow-Up Questions/Issues Raised

1. Why has **CalEPA not filled the federal testing gap** for public safety and environmental oversight?
  2. Who is responsible for **underwater debris and beach sand remediation**?
  3. Can CalEPA establish **ongoing dialogue** or calls with community advocates?
  4. Are the **lessons of past fires (e.g. Camp, Woolsey)** being applied, especially concerning HABs?
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## Action Items

- CalEPA committed to internally **following up on testing gaps, storm drain signage, and clarifying underwater remediation roles.**
- Ashley provided **photographic evidence, contact info, and specific community concerns.**
- CalEPA encouraged continued **community engagement**, outreach to legislators, and documentation of environmental impacts.
- **Impact of the Fire on Wildlife and Public Health [6:17](#)**
  - Oelsen shares personal experiences and data from wildlife surveys conducted since 2020, documenting the impact of the fire on local ecosystems and wildlife.
  - Oelsen discusses the challenges in getting accurate and timely information from local agencies, including the County and Public Health, regarding beach advisories and closures.
  - Oelsen highlights the presence of toxic materials in storm drains and the lack of signage to warn the public, especially children.
  - Oelsen questions the state's role in filling the gap left by federal agencies in testing residential properties and the need for better public health protection.
- **Community Concerns and Lack of Information [33:05](#)**
  - Oelsen expresses frustration with the lack of clear communication and action from local and state agencies regarding the fire's environmental impact.
  - Oelsen shares concerns about the presence of toxic materials on beaches and the lack of transparency in testing and decision-making processes.
  - Oelsen discusses the challenges in getting accurate information from local agencies and the need for better coordination and communication.

- CalEPA acknowledges the challenges in providing clear and timely information to the public and the need for ongoing discussions and coordination with local and state agencies.
- **Ongoing Efforts and Future Directions** [45:45](#)
  - Oelsen emphasizes the importance of continued outreach and advocacy to address the environmental and public health challenges posed by the fire.
  - CalEPA highlights the ongoing efforts of various agencies to address the fire's impact and the need for continued collaboration and communication.
  - Oelsen discusses the importance of learning from past experiences and implementing better strategies to prevent similar environmental disasters in the future.
  - CalEPA acknowledges the complexity of the situation and the need for continued efforts to address the ongoing challenges and ensure public safety and environmental protection.