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Work Samples (in order, PDFs attached):

America's oil capital was moving away from cars. Then a new mayor arrived. — *The Washington Post* (August 21, 2024)
https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2024/08/21/houston-cars-bicycles-transit-climate/

This seaside town will power thousands of homes with waves — *The Washington Post* (November 19, 2024)
https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2024/11/19/wave-energy-pacwave-oregon-state/

As crews work to contain big California fire, another ignites near Yosemite — *The Washington Post* (July 5, 2024)
https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2024/07/05/california-wildfires-thompson-french-map/

America's oil capital was moving away from cars. Then a new mayor arrived.

Houston faces choices confronting many U.S. cities. Billions of federal dollars are available for them to upgrade rail and bike transit, but are wedges in the way.

Mayor Sylvester Turner (left) and Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County President Tom Lambert at a ribbon-cutting for a new light rail line in Houston. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

By Sarah Kaplan
August 12, 2019 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

HOUSTON — This epicenter of the oil and gas industry was ready to shed its reputation of being a car-centric city. Bicycle infrastructure was nonexistent, pedestrians had to dodge speeding traffic on the expand-public transit. Voters in Harris County, home to Houston, had approved billions of dollars to improve public transportation.

But after Mayor John Whitmire took office in January, everything changed. The city's chief transportation planner left, bike infrastructure projects were stalled and local transit authority — largely appointed by the mayor — delayed parts of a $7.5 billion public transit expansion.

Advocates for transit and "safer streets" in Houston say they now suffer from neglect, and fear the city is slipping the clock back on transportation alternatives. It comes at a critical time for many Texas cities, which are in the process of making decisions that will meaningful shift away from reliance on the automobile. Whether America can make this shift could depend on the outcome of city by city battles.

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"Some people think it's controversial to take away a lane from cars and to put in a bike lane. I think it's controversial to only have one way of getting around," said Jim Colinda, a cycling advocate in Houston. "We have choices in all other parts of our lives, but when it comes to transportation, we only have one option."

Along with other cities nationwide, Houston has a historic opportunity to diversify its transportation network, and in turn reduce air pollution and improve public health. Federal funding for transit and bicycle infrastructure available for cities in towns in South Texas and pollution safety projects, largely through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act, Democrat Joe Biden's signature climate law.

Roads blanketed in sweltering over 95 degrees Fahrenheit dollars to modernize and upgrade public transportation fleet. Roughly $3.5 billion of that money is earmarked for Texas, which ranks among the most road-weary states. Its highways are the most congested in the nation's expansion. Los Angeles has pledged to make the south Houston carpool lane, with the best of intentions, commuting by car.

Some cities, however, have been reluctant to shift away from cars and bicycles. In addition, the competition for grants is more or less highly competitive, with four applications submitted for each one that gets accepted.

Ever since the 1950s, American metropolises have been designed around cars. Interstates, for example, the nation's fourth-largest city has grown synonymous with roads, boasting the widest freeway in the country, the sprawling Interstate 10 that stretches 26 miles. Downtown itself is enclosed by loops of highways, with more in the works.

But Houston also has a climate action plan that calls for the city to be carbon-free by 2040. The city is unlikely to meet that target if it can't shrink the carbon footprint of its transportation system, which accounts for an average of Houston's emissions, according to UHP, a nonprofit that runs a climate disclosure system for companies, governments and other institutions.

Cars and people share a street in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Whitmire, an attorney and former Democratic Party state executive, did not respond to a request for comment. But in a series of tweets and statements, Whitmire has dismissed Houston's bike lanes as "increasing gridlock" and said he wants to prioritize spending on road repairs. In the city's election, he received backing from a political action committee that opposed, construction firms, and some local and big ticket donors, and he vastly outspent his opponent, the less than likely challenger Lee Kelley.

Leaders of the mayor-controlled regional transit board, known as Metro, have also shown little interest in promoting the increased use of bicycles, or walking.

"Our number one priority is ridership," said Metro Board Chair Elizabeth Emanuele Brown. "We are not operating for the sake of ha! hold! I and hope they come." We're really focused on our core services and creating that transit culture in order to increase ridership."

Whether Whitmire's policies reflect a permanent shift in Houston remains to be seen. But advocates for multimodal transportation believe the transition away from cars is already baked in, and will outlive his administration.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), who helped secure money for bike lanes and other alternatives to driving in the infrastructure law, said what Houston has achieved is "really remarkable" given its reputation for being a sprawling, car-dominated city. It can be done.

"They've actually done a pretty good job," said Blumenauer, who co-founded Congressional Bike Caucus. But he added, Houston leaders "have to a path to do better."

Cars and people share a street in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Reimagining the car city

Everything in Texas is big, and in the transport sector, Houston is its biggest city, both by population and land area. Development is spread out across the city, and residents have long relied on their cars to get from one to another. Roughly 40 percent of Houstonians own a car, according to the 2019 U.S. Census American Community Survey.

The city spans Houston area residents made their priorities clear. Nearly 70 percent of those voting approved a bond referendum to spend $3.5 billion for the Metro to improve public transit. Over 90 percent of Houstonians would rather spend taxpayer money on public transit than highways, according to the study Rice University Kinder Institute.

While other cities are moving away from cars to address climate change, that's not the case in Houston. Metro officials say their work is largely focused on improving road safety, affordability, air quality and access to transportation.

In the largely immigrant neighborhood of Gulfton, many households have no access to a car. The area, which is Houston's most populous and highest-transit ridership, according to Metro, traditionally advocate Sandra Rodriguez, but workers still must spend up to two hours on their transit commute. For those with disabilities, the journey may not be an option and pedestrians in mobility chairs are more vulnerable to traffic accidents.

Cars and people share a street in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Rufus Cotton, 74, is one of those who would welcome options. He lives in a neighborhood where the nearest red stop is more than a mile away, and he has cross infrequently.

"There are places the bus won't even take you," he said.

The need for multimodal transit is also an environmental health issue, advocates say. The Houston region has the worst air quality in the country after Los Angeles, and cars and trucks on the road are biggest contrary of air pollutants than the fossil fuel and concrete industries.

Poor air quality can result in chronic health issues, and it tends to be worse in lower-income communities because of their proximity to highways and manufacturing facilities, said Holly Cook, a registered nurse at the Texas Medical Center and state senator for the 13th district.

"People are exposed to toxins because somebody is not willing to invest," Cook said, referring to policymakers who labor on transportation infrastructure. "Air quality, for me, is a social issue, it is "purely because of racial, purely because of racial injustice."

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Leaders of Metro say they are investing, but in a way that enhances how people want to travel once. Instead of spending money to expand the bus and rail system, Metro is using federal money from the infrastructure law to improve the system, including adding more bus shelters and better shelters. Its sidewalks and pedestrian accessibility. The city has also invested in "micro-transit" — providing free van rides in select neighborhoods to those who need help with short trips.

"After covid, we've seen internet rates, construction costs increase," said Brock, the Metro board chair. "We would be looking at compromising our day-to-day operations. ... We just simply could not do that at this time."

Gabe Cisneros, executive director of the advocacy group Link Houston, said he remains hopeful the city will come to focus on moving people, not just vehicles.

"We have a mayor who has been around Texas politics a really long time — who has a decidedly different approach to transportation policy," said Cisneros. But he added, "We have seen that progress in mobility options are possible in the city of Houston.

Cars and people share a street in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Unsafe at many speeds

In December 2021, Juan Flores, an ex-convicted, was returning a crosswalk on his bike with his daughter when a car ran a stop sign and collided with him. He escaped with stitches on his eye. His daughter had a bump on her head.

Less than a year later, a car turned in to Flores while he was riding his bike in a parking lot. He escaped unscathed, but his daughter was hit, rendered in a temporary point of view.

"It's dangerous out there," he said. "The problem is, with the people in Houston, they're just not used to having that many bike riders around them. Some people don't like that. At the time they see, well, this is how accidents happen."

Cars and people share a street in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Texas has recorded a death on its roadways — involving motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists — every day since Nov. 1, 2020, with an average of 4 deaths per day, according to the Texas Department of Transportation. In Houston, a hub of protected bike lanes and the crumbling sidewalks make cyclists and pedestrians more vulnerable. Some say road rage and driving have also contributed.

The safety of cyclists has been a core issue for Cotrelle, 40, who made a big shift in his life when he had to leave his job in New City to move to more south in Houston.

Rose-Ann, he's become one of the best-known advocates for cycling infrastructure, through the nonprofit Bikeflexible. The push for safer streets has taken him to the Biden administration and to Capitol Hill, organizing bicycle rides at the federal and state capitals will soon be rolling.

Cars and people share a street in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Houston is well-suited for cyclists, said Cotrelle, given its flat topography and agreeable weather for nine months of the year. Even so, bicycle infrastructure in the city remains limited to downtown, the harbor and a few neighborhoods.

Under then-mayor Sylvester Turner, the city received Rose-million in federal funding to meet its pro commitment to Vision Zero, a pledge to eliminate all traffic deaths by 2030. The city unveiled a plan to connect the Heights, a neighborhood to the city, and already has over 300 miles of infrastructure.

When Whitmire took the mayor's office in January, those projects ran some of their earlier support. The bike lane on Houston Avenue was slated for removal, another project was paused for a mandated after-hiring exercises process.

Daisy Ou, who has worked at Bakery Street Fresh Bake Daily for nearly three decades now, said she's noticed a lack of sympathy or patience for customers after the bike lane on 12th Street was installed in front of her shop last year. Sources the new lane prevents any left turns into her parking lot.

"I lose a lot of customers that don't already know me," she said. "They see the doughnut shop, they can't turn around, or they don't stop and go to their next business."

Cars or bikes navigate the new Houston Avenue bike lane in Houston neighborhood of Gulfton. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

Ever-expanding roads

Even as advocacy mounts for alternatives, Texas is making plans to build more lanes, more cars, more roads. The state has allocated billions to expand its highways. Its current plan, known as Texas Clear Lanes, would add lanes to 1,000 miles of roadway. Houston has planned the highway would destroy more than a thousand homes and places of worship — largely in communities of color — before it abandoned the project.

According to Michael Morris, engineer with advocacy group Stop TxDOT 4.0, transportation planners in Texas don't analyze how new freeway lanes induce demand for more driving, adding to congestion. Instead, they assume that the more lanes are added, which in half roads and highways for sale, "in and.

The Texas Constitution requires 40 percent of TxDOT's $15 billion annual budget go to general roads, a law similar to those in other states. Little is left over to TxDOT's funding to spend on multimodal transit, meaning that Houston seeks most of its funding for multimodal projects from the city, which is strapped for cash, to Harris County, which has a sales tax revenue stream.

Reception of multimodal projects varies by neighborhood. County Commissioner Rodney Ellis represents a predominantly Black Houston's Third Ward, a predominantly Black neighborhood that has been home to Beyoncé and other artists. In recent years, he's pushed the county to invest millions of dollars into bike lanes in the Third Ward and other neighborhoods, even though some residents call it a waste of money because they don't see many cyclists.

Cars or bikes navigate the new Houston Avenue bike lane in Houston neighborhood of Gulfton. (Photo: Yi-Chin Lee for The Washington Post)

For Houston, investments in new transportation options have become a matter of equity, Ellis said. Residents who live in the city's poorest areas, before it expands transit and bicycle facilities, so should it invest now, leaning on the future?

Cotrelle said he knows where he stands.

"If you want to change the transportation culture in a place, you have to change the infrastructure," he said. "The infrastructure tells people how to behave."

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This seaside town will power thousands of homes with waves

Wave energy has been untapped so far, but an experiment could unlock its potential in the United States.

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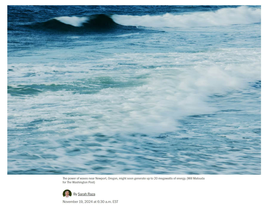


The power of waves near Newport, Oregon, might soon generate up to 10 megawatts of energy. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

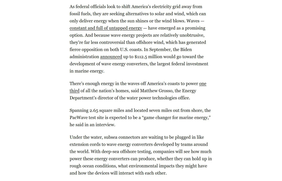
By Sarah Prior

Updated November 23, 2019 at 5:30 a.m. EST

NEWPORT, Ore. — At a moment when large offshore wind projects are encountering public resistance, a nascent ocean industry is showing promise: wave energy.

It's coming to life in Newport, a rainy coastal town of nearly 10,500 people located a couple of hours south of Portland. Home to fishing operators and researchers, Newport attracts tourists and retirees with its famous aquarium, sprawling beaches and noisy sea lions. If you ask anyone at the lively harbfront about a wave energy project, they probably don't know much about it.

And yet right off the coast, a $100 million effort with funding from the Energy Department aims to convert the power of waves into energy, and help catch up to Europe in developing this new technology. The hour-like contraptions, located several miles offshore, will deliver up to 20 megawatts of energy — enough to power thousands of homes and businesses.



As federal officials look to shift America's electricity grid away from fossil fuels, they are seeking alternatives to solar and wind, which can only deliver energy when the sun shines or the wind blows. Waves — constant and full of untapped energy — have emerged as a promising option. And because wave energy projects are relatively unobtrusive, they're far less controversial than offshore wind, which has generated fierce opposition on both U.S. coasts. In September, the Biden administration announced up to $12.5 million would go toward the development of wave energy converters, the largest federal investment in marine energy.

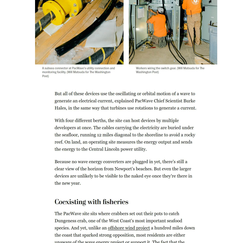
There's enough energy in the waves off America's coasts to power one third of all the nation's homes, said Matthew Grosso, the Energy Department's director of the water power technology office.

Spanning 2.63 square miles and located seven miles out from shore, the PacWave test site is expected to be a "game changer for marine energy," he said in an interview.

Under the water, subsea connectors are waiting to be plugged in like extension cords to wave energy converters developed by teams around the world. With deep-sea offshore testing, companies will see how much power these energy converters can produce, whether they can hold up in rough ocean conditions, what environmental impacts they might have and how the devices will interact with each other.

PacWave, a project of Oregon State University (OSU), represents a necessary step for commercializing wave energy, experts said.

"The research that's been done in the past 15 years is reaching the point of what we can do just in labs or in theory," Grosso said. "We've got to start testing some of this stuff out and see what works and what doesn't."



Energy systems rolling off PacWave's utility connection and monitoring facility, left, off Newport, Oregon. Subsea cables of the cable connects the offshore facilities to a land, also. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

How wave energy works

Unlike other forms of renewable energy, engineers have not yet settled on a single model of wave energy converters. While solar panels have converged into the three-blade turbine shape, many types of wave energy converters are in development, testing the motion of the wave into electrical energy in different ways.

You can feel the energy in the waves, when it laps at the shore or when it rocks your boat. Created by wind over the sea, it's one part of the ecosystem of renewable energy that's available to us. But since waves don't move in a linear motion, they're harder to capture energy from than the flow of wind over a turbine, for example.

One wave energy converter may not work in all environments, either — models can vary based on the depth of water and conditions the converter will operate in. Some use rotating cylinders; some are buoys that move up and down with the waves; others look like snakes with joints that move when waves roll through.

A subsea connector at PacWave's utility connection and monitoring facility. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

Workers swing the model giant. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

But all of these devices use the oscillating or orbital motion of a wave to generate an electrical current, explained PacWave Chief Scientist Burke Hales, in the same way that turbines use rotations to generate a current.

With these different benefits, the site can host devices by multiple developers at once. The cables carrying the electricity are buried under the seafloor, running 21 miles diagonal to the shoreline to avoid a rocky reef. On land, an operating site measures the energy output and sends the energy to the Central Lincoln power utility.

Because no wave energy converters are plugged in yet, there's still a clear view of the horizon from Newport's beaches. But even the larger devices are unlikely to be visible to the naked eye once they're there in the new year.

Coexisting with fisheries

The PacWave site sits where crabbers set out their pots to catch Dungeness crab, one of the West Coast's most important seafood species. And yet, unlike an offshore wind project a hundred miles down the coast that sparked strong opposition, most residents are either unaware of the wave energy project or support it. The land for the project is limited, and unlikely to spur commercial activity offshore that could damage the town's fishing economy, has helped its cause.

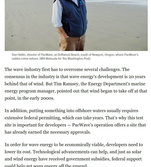
When deciding where to locate the project, Newport was out for its proximity to OSU's main campus in Corvallis and the local fishing fleet's openness to the idea. The town also hosts the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Marine Operations Center for the Pacific, which has its own research fleet.

The exterior of PacWave's utility connection and monitoring facility. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

PacWave also brought the promise of jobs, said Belinda Batten, who conducted outreach for PacWave when she directed the Energy Department's Northwest National Marine Renewable Energy Center. Many here remember how NOAA's move to Newport in 2002 created employment opportunities.

Perhaps most importantly, OSU already had a strong relationship with the community given the marine center in town, according to Charlie Plybon, who lives in Newport and is the Oregon senior policy manager for the nonprofit Surfrider Foundation.

It took years of outreach and many town hall meetings for Batten, who now serves as a senior adviser to the OSU provost, and Kasty Jacobsen, Lincoln County commissioner and a fisherman's daughter, to connect their trust with the community. When they assembled some first members to decide the site, it took all of 30 minutes for the crabbers to draw a plot on a map of the ocean for a location that could work for everyone involved.



That area was important fishing grounds for the fleet, said crabber Bob Eder. In his bottom-down shirt and sneakers, Eder looks like he doesn't look like a stereotypical fisherman, but he's one of the most well-respected crabbers in the fleet and still goes out in the winter every season at the age of 75. The PacWave site could represent a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the fleet every crabbing season, he said. On the navigation system in his boat, he pointed to a map that showed he had previously crabbed in the area that now will focus.

But the operators agreed to give it up for the sake of the experiment.

Eder, a representative of the fishing community during the process, said that the agreement with Oregon State was a show of goodwill from the fishing community, whose members care about the environment and want to preserve their livelihood.

"[Climate change] definitely affects those of us whose work is directly involved with the environment," he said. "And so every fishery is at an environmental risk."

Wave energy is more like Oregon than sun is the most competitive renewable energy option. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

Where wave energy could thrive

In states like Oregon, where an abundance of renewable energy has lowered the price of electricity to around 3½ cents per kilowatt hour, wave energy isn't a competitive option. The first large-scale commercial wave energy project, by contrast, is expected to produce electricity costing up to 47 cents per kilowatt hour.

But in small, remote communities that depend on more expensive diesel fuel, wave power could ease energy woes.

"There's remote communities in Alaska where everyone is running on diesel generators, they're set on the grid, they have no-electrical system," said PacWave Director Dan Hellin.

Dan Hellin, director of PacWave, at Hallmark Resort, south of Newport, Oregon, where PacWave's utility-scale system. (Bill Metcalfe for The Washington Post)

The wave industry first has to overcome several challenges. The consensus in the industry is that wave energy's development is 20 years behind that of wind. But Tim Ramsey, the Energy Department's marine energy program manager, pointed out that wind began to take off at that point, in the early 2000s.

In addition, putting something into offshore waters usually requires extensive federal permitting, which can take years. That's why this test site is important for developers — PacWave's operation offers a site that has already carried the necessary approvals.

In order for wave energy to be economically viable, developers need to lower its cost. Technological advancements can help, and just as solar and wind energy have received government subsidies, federal support could help get wave energy off the ground.

Members of the Newport fishing fleet — even those who aren't fans of the project — have hope that this renewable energy offers possibilities.

Crabber Bob Kemp, 75, said he isn't thrilled that he won't be able to fish for crab in that part of the ocean anymore, but he's rooting on the researchers to make good use of the space they've taken.

"I want to make sure the project has some kind of pressure on it to keep going and not just [move on] like a contractor moves on to a new house," Kemp said. "I want them to stay on that."

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As crews work to contain big California fire, another ignites near Yosemite

The French Fire near Mariposa is one of 23 blazes that have broken out statewide this week, amid a scorching heat wave.

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Flames from the French Fire burn on a hillside above Mariposa, Calif., on Friday. (Noah Berger/AP)

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By Sarah Raza

July 5, 2024 at 1:39 p.m. EDT

Another fast-moving wildfire has broken out in California, this time near a gateway town to Yosemite National Park, prompting mandatory evacuations and a temporary road closure.

The French Fire started Thursday evening at French Camp Road in Mariposa county after a heat wave brought days of scorching temperatures. As of 1:14 p.m. local time Friday, the fire had spread to 843 acres and was 15 percent contained, according to Cal Fire's Madera-Mariposa-Merced unit.

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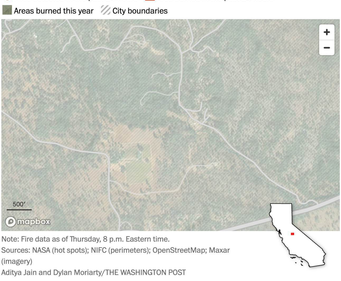
Some of the 1,100 residents forced to evacuate were allowed to return home Friday afternoon. Also on Friday, Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) secured a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, making it the second infusion of funds California has received this week to fight wildfires.

The French Fire's latest burn

Fires detected in the past 24 hours | Area burned in the past 24 hours | Areas burned this year | City boundaries



Note: Fire data as of Thursday, 8 p.m. Eastern time.
Sources: NASA (hot spots); NIFC (perimeters); OpenStreetMap; Maxar (imagery)
Aditya Jain and Dylan Moriarty/THE WASHINGTON POST

The French Fire is the latest blaze to ignite in California amid a particularly dangerous fire season. Just this week, 23 fires have broken out across the state, causing some towns to cancel Fourth of July fireworks. Most of the active fires are at least 50 percent contained, with no fatalities reported.

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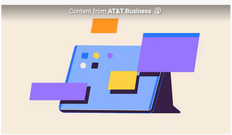
Firefighters halted the spread of the French Fire overnight as the wind calmed. Now they are focused on the eastern side of the fire after hulldozers and fire crews constructed a line on the eastern side of Mariposa. A church has been designated as a temporary evacuation point. The cause of the fire is still under investigation.

The fire had closed a 1.6-mile section of State Route 140, one of the main roads to enter and exit Yosemite, but it reopened Friday afternoon as firefighters made headway.

Cal Fire crews also made progress in containing the Thompson Fire in Northern California's Butte County in recent days, toiling amid high temperatures expected to reach 114 degrees Friday. That fire has grown to 3,789 acres and was 46 percent contained as of Friday morning. The town of Oroville, home to roughly 20,000 people, did not escape damage: 25 structures have been destroyed by the fire. In addition, two fire personnel suffered injuries.



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Cal Fire has added 200 personnel to the Thompson Fire, with a total of 2,219 personnel working on the mop-up operation — the physical process of extinguishing or removing burning material to make a fire less likely to escape, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Alejandro Cholico, public information officer for the Thompson Fire, said the goal is to be able to "wrap up" the operation by July 15.

"It's looking really good. We're continuing our mop-up operations, and our personnel are working diligently with our operators to continue the containment," he said.

He added that firefighters are using work-rest cycles to ensure well-being and avoid heat injuries.

The wildfire began Tuesday morning. The same afternoon, though unrelated to the Thompson Fire, officers detained a 61-year-old Oroville resident who had set a backfire using a propane torch. He was then arrested on a felony charge of unlawfully causing a fire to wildland. The cause of the Thompson Fire is still under investigation.

More on climate change

Understanding our climate: Global warming is a real phenomenon, and weather disasters are undeniably linked to it. As temperatures rise, heat waves are more often sweeping the globe — and parts of the world are becoming too hot to survive.

What can be done? The Post is tracking a variety of climate solutions, as well as the Biden administration's actions on environmental issues. It can feel overwhelming facing the impacts of climate change, but there are ways to cope with climate anxiety.

Inventive solutions: Some people have built off-the-grid homes from trash to stand up to a changing climate. As seas rise, others are exploring how to harness marine energy.

What about your role in climate change? Our climate coach Michael J. Coren is answering questions about environmental choices in our everyday lives. Submit yours here. You can also sign up for our Climate Coach newsletter.

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