

Big Basin Redwoods park slowly rebuilding after wildfire, faces 'a massive job'

April 26 2021, by <https://www.mercurynews.com/2021/04/23/Big-Basin-Redwoods-Slow-Progress-On-Rebuilding-After-Wildfire-A-Massive-Job/>, The Merc



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Nearly eight months after Gov. Gavin Newsom visited Big Basin

Redwoods State Park to tour the damage after a major wildfire, green sprouts are coming back on the blackened trunks of the park's ancient redwoods. But not much else has changed on the charred landscape.

Hazardous trees pose a risk. The wreckage of burned buildings and vehicles from the Aug. 19 wildfire still hasn't been cleared. State officials haven't completed a damage estimate of how much it will cost to rebuild. And the process for holding public meetings to construct new facilities at Big Basin—California's oldest state [park](#), whose soaring redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains attracted 1 million visitors a year—hasn't yet begun.

The delays are causing lovers of the iconic park, whose trees tower up to 300 feet tall and date back to the Roman Empire, to feel sympathy for the rangers and parks officials who are faced with a huge rebuilding project. But the limited public information and seemingly slow pace so far are also prompting some to worry that Big Basin could lose out on tens of millions of dollars in federal, state and private funding if the Newsom administration doesn't give the project a higher profile, better focus and more clear timetable for recovery.

"This is one of the biggest opportunities that state parks will ever have for [public support](#) and government support with one of the most treasured state parks in the system," said State Sen. John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, who served as California's Natural Resources Secretary under Gov. Jerry Brown. "They have to move and they have to be ready. They have to give us the tools to help them. That isn't happening right now."

Parks officials said Thursday that they plan to reopen a portion of the park, the Rancho del Oso area near the coast, by Memorial Day. But it will be "at least a year" before any other part of Big Basin, including its redwood groves, is opened to the public, said Chris Spohrer, superintendent of the Santa Cruz District of State Parks.

"This is a vast, vast project," Spohrer said. "We're asking for the public's patience. I can empathize with the public wanting things to move more quickly. But this is a massive job."

Nearly all of the big redwoods are expected to survive. The park's other features were wiped out. When the CZU Lightning Complex Fire burned through the 18,000-acre park in August, it destroyed Big Basin's historic visitor center, headquarters, park amphitheater, museum and store. It also destroyed more than 100 buildings, including 20 ranger homes, Spohrer said, along with 225 campsites, 35 tent cabins, 6 wooden vehicle bridges, 46 pedestrian bridges, 51 culverts, the park's electrical system and hundreds of signs, fences, wooden stairs and other park features.

State parks officials have cut down some dangerous trees, nearly all Douglas firs. They have replaced 18 culverts, and are clearing dirt roads and trails in the park.

In the months after the fire, the California Environmental Protection Agency took an inventory of toxics, like asbestos and propane tanks. That work was completed in December.

But work to clear the burned wreckage won't begin until next week. That project, overseen by the California Office of Emergency Services and the state Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, will take eight to 10 months, Spohrer said.

Meanwhile, Caltrans will finish clearing hazardous trees that burned along a six-mile stretch of Highway 236 through the park by June.

In January, state parks officials provided the first preliminary estimates of park damage to FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, for reimbursement. The total was about \$200 million, Spohrer said. That number, which he said is being refined regularly and isn't complete,

includes multiple state parks that also suffered damage in last year's fires, including Butano, Henry Cowell, Wilder Ranch and others, although "the vast majority" is for Big Basin, he said.

State parks officials also have hired Placeworks, a Berkeley-based planning and design firm, to help set up a public process to figure out what new facilities should be built, and where. The state will issue a timetable sometime this summer for public meetings, Spohrer said, although there is no goal yet for when they hope to begin or finish construction of new campgrounds and other facilities.

Environmental groups who raised more than \$500,000 after the fire to help with immediate costs, and provide housing to rangers, said they know the job is huge. But unless more specifics are made public, some say, the state may lose out on rare, and key, funding sources available now.

Among them: President Biden's \$2 trillion infrastructure bill. Vice president Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi are Bay Area residents familiar with Big Basin. Also, the state has a budget surplus of at least \$10 billion—not a common occurrence—and Newsom is preparing in a few weeks to issue his revised May budget on how to spend it.

"It's understandable that it takes some time to deal with this highly complex situation," said Sara Barth, executive director of Sempervirens Fund, the Los Altos-based environmental group whose founders first saved Big Basin's breathtaking trees from logging in 1902.

"But I do think it's essential they articulate to decision-makers what their costs are going to be and what their needs are so they can get in the mix for funding opportunities that may not come along again for a long time."

Last week, when Newsom signed a \$536 million bill to reduce wildfire risk. It included just \$15 million for state parks.

If the state issues more updates and details on what is needed at Big Basin, that will help nonprofit groups to raise millions from private donors, similar to other big Bay Area parks projects, like the successful effort to turn Crissy Field near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco from a military airstrip into a beloved public park more than 20 years ago, said Sam Hodder, president of San Francisco-based Save the Redwoods League.

"It is important that we use our time wisely and not let all of our desire to make the perfect plan for the park delay specificity so that we lose an opportunity to get funding," Hodder said. "This could be the next Crissy Field."

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Citation: Big Basin Redwoods park slowly rebuilding after wildfire, faces 'a massive job' (2021, April 26) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-04-big-basin-redwoods-slowly-rebuilding.html>

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