

Our Stories – Podcast episode one

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Presented by coastsidenews.com in collaboration with KHMB Radio and the Coastal Literary Arts Movement

Host: David Gorn

[Intro]

Hello everyone, and welcome to Our Stories, a collection of news stories from coastsidenews.com. This podcast is a collaboration with the nonprofit Coastal Literary Arts Movement and KHMB Radio.

I'm David Gorn.

So here's what we're doing today: we picked out a couple of stories from coastsidenews.com, publishers of the Half Moon Bay Review and the Pacifica Tribune, and we're going to talk about why these particular stories matter, how they could affect you, and maybe have a little fun along the way.

Story one: A new kind of fire risk

Now I know you remember this—it's what a little spring rain sounds like these days on the Coastside.

With me is Sebastian Miño-Buccheli, a Coastside News reporter who has covered climate change on the Coastside.

David:

Sebastian, doesn't it feel like "atmospheric river" is a term that's now so familiar to us, but also somehow brand new?

Sebastian:

Oh, I know—"bomb cyclone." That's another one. We never had those when we were kids.

David:

Right. But your story isn't about bomb cyclones or even rain, is it?

Sebastian:

No, my story is about fire.

David:

Hold on. I want to play that rain sound again... Okay, sorry, go ahead—fire?

Sebastian:

Yeah, forest fire. Not water, not gushing rain—more like this...

Sound of fire crackling.

David:

That's intense.

Sebastian:

It is. My story is about the growing threat of fire on the Coastside and what we might be able to do about it. One of the reasons the threat is so dire is because of the erratic weather

patterns we now face—extended droughts, sudden storms and unpredictable winds. That combination is a recipe for large fires.

David:

It sounds counterintuitive—how do intense rainstorms contribute to wildfires?

Sebastian:

It's the juxtaposition of intense rain and extended drought. Rains cause vegetation to grow fast. Then, when drought and heat return, all that growth dries up. It becomes fuel.

David:

So the more things grow, the more there is to burn.

Sebastian:

Exactly. And when you add in dry winds—like the Santa Ana winds—it doesn't take much for a fire to spread quickly.

David:

Are there particular areas on the Coastside where this is most concerning?

Sebastian:

Pretty much everywhere—Montara, Moss Beach, El Granada, Sweeney Ridge in Pacifica, the hills along Highway 92, up and down Highway 1. We live in a rural, wild area.

David:

That's a big reason I love it here—but it does come with risks.

Sebastian:

CalFire recently released a revised Fire Hazard Severity Zone map. A lot of the coast is now designated “high fire danger.”

David:

What does that designation mean?

Sebastian:

It means the state sees these areas as vulnerable to severe wildfire over the next 30 to 50 years unless action is taken. It also means new regulations are coming.

David:

Like what?

Sebastian:

For example, the state is proposing a five-foot “ember-resistant zone” around all homes in these areas—no vegetation, no wood fencing, no flammable structures.

David:

So people will need five feet of gravel or cement around their homes?

Sebastian:

That’s the idea. Governor Newsom signed an executive order to speed up this process, but regulations haven’t been finalized. Cities along the coast will need to decide how to implement them.

David:

Will this affect fire insurance?

Sebastian:

According to state officials, no. The fire maps are for planning—not for insurance. Insurance companies use their own models.

David:

But I imagine insurers will still pay attention to those maps.

Sebastian:

Maybe not officially, but yes—designation as a high-fire-risk area could affect property values. Some buyers may be hesitant to move in.

David:

So to sum up: CalFire has reclassified much of the Coastside as high fire risk. That could lead to new rules about defensible space, might affect property values, and may or may not influence insurance rates.

Sebastian:

Exactly. Cities like Half Moon Bay are already responding. Officials recently toured Frenchmans Creek and plan to visit other neighborhoods too.

David:

And which parts of the Coastside are now officially “high fire danger”?

Sebastian:

Most of eastern Half Moon Bay and Pacifica, large areas of Highway 92, El Granada, Moss Beach, Montara.

David:

Got it. And we'll post a map in the story on coastsidenews.com.

One last question. Isn't the coast wet? We have redwoods and fog. Doesn't that help?

Sebastian:

Redwoods burn too. CalFire sees our vegetation—fed by winter storms, dried out by summer heat—as real fire fuel. Fire danger on the Coastside is very real.

David:

Thank you, Sebastian. That's a lot to think about.

Story two: School closures and community impact

Music cue—"Fire and Rain" by James Taylor

David:

Okay, let's shift from fire and rain to another challenge on the Coastside—our schools.

Schools have always been a concern here, and lately, it's reached a higher pitch: teacher strikes, school closures, staff layoffs. With us to unpack it all is Kathryn Wheeler of Coastside News.

David:

Kathryn, welcome.

Kathryn: Happy to be here.

David:

You brought a little sound with you, right?

Kathryn:

Yes. This is from a recent school board meeting in Pacifica, where the board voted to cut staff and close two school programs.

Parent audio clip:

"I urge the board to listen to the teachers and parents, to hold off on implementing these drastic changes..."

David:

That was Pacifica parent Magnus Chow, concerned about a special needs class that's now being split between two schools. Larger class sizes and classroom changes are especially difficult for special needs students.

Kathryn:

Technically, the district says it isn't closing Ocean Shore or Vallemar Middle School. But they are moving all students—around 400 in total—to other schools.

David:

So no students remain? That sure sounds like a closure.

Kathryn:

The district argues that officially closing a school would trigger a CEQA review process, which takes about a year. By calling it a relocation, they've avoided that—for now. But many parents feel misled.

David:

And this isn't just about school closures, right?

Kathryn:

Right. More than 65 teachers and staff have been laid off. Parents especially loved Ocean Shore's K-8 model—it was a unique and beloved program.

David:

Let me guess—this all comes down to money?

Kathryn:

Of course. Pacifica schools receive the lowest per-pupil funding of any district in San Mateo County.

David:

Wait—I thought Cabrillo Unified was lowest?

Kathryn:

Cabrillo is the lowest among unified districts. Pacifica is the lowest overall.

David:

So what kind of shortfall are we talking about?

Kathryn:

Both districts get roughly one-third the funding of wealthier districts across the hill. And Pacifica has also lost nearly 20 percent of its students in the last decade—especially since COVID.

David:

That's the same trend we're seeing in Half Moon Bay.

Kathryn:

Exactly. It's a microcosm of what's happening in schools across the country: lower enrollment, less funding, teacher shortages.

David:

So what are districts doing to help?

Kathryn:

One innovative approach is building affordable housing for teachers and staff. Pacifica just opened more than 70 new apartments.

David:

That's great. Not just helpful—necessary.

Kathryn:

They hope it'll reduce turnover. With lower salaries on the coast, this kind of housing could help retain quality educators.

David:

Okay, Kathryn—what if someone doesn't have kids? Why should they care?

Kathryn:

Schools are the heart of a community. Good schools drive home sales and property values. Even if you don't have kids, strong schools help your neighborhood thrive.

David:

What's next in this saga?

Kathryn:

There's a recall effort underway against school board members in Pacifica, and a lawsuit to reverse the "relocations." Teachers are waiting to hear about jobs. And parents are wondering—will their kids have a place to go in ten years?

David:

Thank you, Kathryn.

[Outro]

Okay, that's a wrap on our first episode of Our Stories. Big thanks to Sebastian Miño-Buccheli and Kathryn Wheeler of coastsidenews.com for joining us.

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One final thank you—to my dog, Indiana—for the thousands of walks along the Coastside Trail that inspired the idea for this show.

I'm David Gorn. Thanks for joining us. We'll see you again in two weeks.