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Daniel Borenstein  
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Dear Dan,

Last month, you wrote an article in the *Contra Costa Times* in which I did not respond to your request for an interview and, in turn, you referred to the advocacy in which my organization (Save East Bay Hills) engages in to stop the destruction of over 400,000 trees and the spreading of many thousands of gallons of toxic chemicals on East Bay public lands as, among other things, “ridiculous.”

Unfortunately, the very reason I was reluctant to talk to you in fact came to pass: my fear that rather than write an article which attempted to honestly and accurately portray the nature of our opposition, you would do what so many reporters before you had done: simplistically reduce this important debate to nothing more than *trees vs. human lives*, report without fact checking the veracity of various statements made by plan proponents such as the claim that eliminating Eucalyptus and Monterey pine trees will decrease fire risk in the hills, and ignore reasonable and expert criticism of the plan in favor of portraying plan critics as irrational extremists indifferent to public safety.

Given the timing of your call and the experience of the people you had already interviewed to whom I spoke to after I got your email, I concluded that your interest in the issue was fueled by the Chip Johnson hit piece which had recently been published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, an article written after several difficult and unprofessional interviews that involved Johnson repeatedly using profanity and yelling at me, admitting he had no interest in the history of the project, and that he would not be reviewing studies or reading the EIS in order to understand my concerns or educate himself about the scope of the plan. “I’m not going there with you,” he screamed (literally) when I offered to provide him expert analysis, reports, and information about the history of the project.

After that admission, it came as little surprise that Johnson’s final product managed to even further dumb down an already tragically low, one-dimensional and highly irresponsible treatment of this important issue among Bay Area media outlets. In fact, the article began by Johnson proclaiming that any need for democratic debate on the issue of whether or not we should destroy beloved, century-old forests and blanket our public lands in carcinogenic herbicides was wrong and that only an idiot (his incredulous and combative tone implied) would suggest otherwise. A brief chat with another plan critic shortly after he interviewed with you indicated that you were planning to write a similar hit piece, a prediction that was, unfortunately, not without merit.

Indeed, absent from Johnson’s treatment and subsequently, yours, was any discussion of the numerous reports highlighted on our website (see [saveeastbayhills.org/experts.html](http://saveeastbayhills.org/experts.html)) by various public interest agencies and individuals with relevant expertise which have been highly critical of this plan, including:

- URS, FEMA’s environmental consultants, which stated that “there is no scientific evidence to support the project as proposed;”
- The U.S. Forest Service which objected, saying it would “increase the probability of [fire] ignition over current conditions” because “removal of the overstory trees can introduce changes to the environment which increase fire behavior in undesirable ways;”
- Former Oakland firefighter, Chief of Fire Prevention at the Oakland Army Base, and member of the Task Force for Emergency Preparedness convened after the 1991 fire who stated that this plan “turns fire science on its head” and called it “a land transformation disguised as a wildfire hazard mitigation plan,” that “will endanger firefighters and the general public; and ... be an outrageous waste of taxpayer money;”
- Another U.S. Forest Service study which found that reducing the risk to homes from a wildfire does not involve clear cutting vast amount of trees: “home losses can be effectively reduced by focusing mitigation efforts on the structure [such as requiring a fireproof roof] and its immediate surroundings;”
- The Environmental Protection Agency which states that, “the project could result in degradation of natural resources,” is not likely to “provide for natural regeneration,” and is predicated on “extensive use of herbicides” and “risks posed to human health and the environment from that use;” and further expressed concerns about the “potential impacts of climate change on the Project area,” including “the length and severity of the fire season,” “stressed water supplies,” and “the rate and distribution of harmful timber insects and diseases;”
- And FEMA’s admission that the plan will result in “unavoidable adverse impacts ... to vegetation, wildlife and habitats, protected species, soils, water quality, aesthetics, community character, human health and safety, recreation, and noise”—twelve unique and alarming harms each deserving of careful, conscientious public deliberation, but not a single one of which has yet to earn a single drop of ink from a Bay Area reporter.

In short, you (and Johnson) opted out of doing your job in a manner that would be relevant or meaningful to the public you theoretically exist to serve. Instead, you took a cheap shot, and focused not on the issue, but personalities, attacking me for the time honored tradition of using a political cartoon (of Mayor Schaaf in Hazmat suit with chainsaw)—exactly the kind that appear on the editorial page of your own newspaper and have appeared in newspapers throughout the history of journalism—and which accurately reflects the plan: 400,000 trees to be felled by chainsaw and thousands of gallons of cancer causing herbicides to be spread under her and her colleagues’ plan.

Your treatment of this topic put me in mind of an article I recently read which credits the decline of newspapers with, above all else, their prominent lack of journalism, defined as the effort to report the facts, free of bias or cynical stereotypes, even when—in fact, *especially when*—those involved may be standing outside the status quo. In his article *The Top Ten Reasons Newspapers Are Dying*, Ryan Thomas writes: “what should matter most is ... not so much as how a story appeals to our lowest instincts to draw us in. When politics enter the newsroom, papers often use common affiliations to solicit to large, generic groups of people. Journalism should be a neutral platform to which everyone can subscribe unequivocally, not just those on the inside of the slant.”

Yet equal treatment is the last thing those of us who oppose this plan have experienced in the public coverage of this debate. A fear of appearing indifferent to both public safety and the tragic loss suffered by the 1991 Firestorm victims has precluded traditional sources of Bay Area media from approaching this issue with any semblance of neutrality. While I do not deny that the existence of our opposition has been covered, the *nature* of that opposition—the information most vital to allowing the East Bay public

to make fully informed decisions about whether or not they, too, should support or oppose it—has not. Instead, coverage invariably leaves the impression that while there are people who are opposed to the loss of trees, experts claim their elimination is necessary to protect public safety, end of story.

In the absence of any discussion about the expertly substantiated criticism that the plan will in fact increase rather than reduce fire risk, that it will expose citizens to huge amounts of dangerous chemicals,\* release over 17,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases into our environment, poison, displace and kill wildlife (including several protected species), radically alter the appearance and therefore the experience afforded by our public recreation areas, threaten homeowners values by degrading the aesthetics upon which those values depend, eliminate erosion control for hillside homes, cause (according to FEMA) “significant alternation of community character,” as well as a variety of other harms that FEMA itself admits are *unavoidable*, the public is denied information that would allow them to make a sound and informed cost/benefit analysis. Are these many and varied *certain* harms worth the cost of implementing a plan to reduce the risk of one—*fire*—that may or may not ever occur with a plan that many experts claim will in fact exacerbate, rather than reduce, that very risk? What about the alternative fire abatement proposals offered by plan opponents which would decrease fire risk through the cleanup of ground fuels and which do not require destroying our forests or exposing citizens and wildlife to large amount of toxic herbicides?

These are the questions East Bay media should be asking but are not, an approach that leaves plan critics at the mercy of reporters such as Johnson and yourself who dramatically underplay the strength of our position in order sacrifice us on a debased alter to Firestorm victims instead. When those of us who are speaking out against this plan are doing so to protect our own health and safety and that of our families and neighbors, this troubling bias, indeed, this cowardice, does not honor the memory of those who died in that tragic fire 24 years ago; it shames it.

That their suffering and loss should serve not to embolden our resolve to prevent a recurrence of their tragedy through rigorous public debate, but rather to hobble us with emotionally charged rhetoric that

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\* FEMA states that, “The proposed and connected actions would take place in regional parks and other open space areas used for recreation. Visitors and campers in these areas could be exposed to herbicides directly during application and indirectly after application. In addition, because residential neighborhoods are adjacent to the parks and open space, residents could also be exposed to herbicides directly during application and indirectly after application. Because a university, a high school, three elementary schools, and a preschool are also close to project areas, students of all ages have the potential to be exposed.”

While the East Bay Regional Park District tells reporters, and they repeat the claim, that “less than 20 gallons a year” of herbicides would be used, a simple review of the FEMA EIS, which no reporter has bothered to look at, shows that they will, in fact, use more than ten times that amount: a total of 2,250 gallons. Made by Dow Chemical, *Garlon* has been linked to breast cancer and genetic damage called dominant lethal mutations. It has been found to cause severe birth defects when tested on poor animals including rats born with their brains outside their skulls, to harm birds and aquatic species and to damage the kidneys, liver and the blood of dogs, the latter being an issue of particular concern to the legions of dog walkers which regularly visit our public parks. It not only contaminates groundwater and persists in the environment for a year, but, ironically, alters the soil by killing fungi essential to the health of oak trees, one of the species of trees proponents of the plan will not be chopping down, thereby imperiling even those few trees that will be left behind. And this does not even include the herbicides to be used by the City of Oakland and U.C. Berkeley which will add hundreds, if not thousands, of additional gallons of Monsanto’s *Glyphosate*, a known carcinogen associated with an increased risk of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and *Imazapyr*, which increases risk of adrenal, brain, and thyroid cancer.

stifles discussion before it is allowed to begin, threatens to turn this myopic and base response to that fire among Bay Area media outlets into the root cause of yet another disaster. For while plan opponents seek to elevate the discussion on this plan to prevent a *future* tragedy, local media has proven itself incapable of moving beyond a former one that is so sensationalist and even after more than two decades, so raw, that the abandonment of caution, reason, and critical analysis are paradoxically and counterproductively portrayed as the moral high ground.

That is why I did not return your email. That is why we, at Save the East Bay Hills, decided after numerous interviews that netted results so inaccurate and counterproductive that going forth the only form of “old media” in which we would engage were Op-Ed pieces and paid public service advertisements that delivered our message to the public undiluted—free from the meddling of uninformed and unwilling to become informed middle men such as yourself who stand as ignorant gatekeepers between us and the public we seek to educate. Why assist reporters such as yourself in your efforts to misinform the East Bay public, or to crucify with hyperbole the well intentioned people working to stop this environmentally catastrophic proposal, including myself?

As an Oakland hills resident, husband, and father of two who has taken the time to educate myself as to both the scope of the devastation to come as well as the often withering criticism of this plan by various experts—and motivated by this knowledge *and no alternative agenda beyond that of public safety*—has chosen to volunteer my time to stop a plan I think will endanger my family’s welfare and that of my neighbors, I was wholly undeserving of the scorn heaped upon me by you and Johnson. That I would be subjected to such derision by media outlets located in the Bay Area—an area so closely identified with heightened environmental awareness—was particularly disappointing. For no doubt were I working to stop an identical agenda to destroy trees on over 2,059 acres of public lands and to spread vast amounts of cancer causing herbicides made by Monsanto and Dow under any rationale but the false one being posited, I would be hailed by the both of you as hero instead of pariah. (This isn’t speculation: consider that just days after your piece condoning the destruction of nearly half a million trees appeared, another reporter at your paper went after PG&E for trying to remove, comparatively speaking, only “600 trees in Concord, at least as many in Walnut Creek and hundreds more in neighboring communities.”) Nothing illustrated your need to gloss over this tension more than your tortured use of euphemism to describe the vast clear cutting of thousands of acres of trees. Calling the plan to eliminate our beautiful, healthy forests comprised of some of the tallest species of trees on Earth with mere shallow grasses as an “Open Skies” initiative may have proved balm to your conflicted conscience, but for those of us who oppose this plan, it only served to heighten our awareness of your hypocrisy.

All of which, of course, begs the question of why, given my disdain for your former coverage of this issue, I am bothering to write you now. To which I can honestly reply that I am writing because I know you can do better, and because I am hopeful that if I relay a story to you that demonstrates just how dangerous the climate of intolerance for dissent on this issue fueled by articles such as yours has become, you might be motivated to right your wrong.

On Friday, September 4, my wife was running on Skyline Blvd. in Oakland when she passed Oakland Fire Department Vegetation Manager, Vince Crudele, and some local residents standing in front of a large pile of mulch just west of the Redwood Regional Park entrance. When she returned approximately 10 minutes later, a fire truck had arrived, and firefighters were dousing the mulch pile with water due to the risk of combustion. She approached a firefighter and asked what was happening, and he explained that the mulch pile was from a recently felled and chipped pine tree which had started to compost and had become so hot, it had begun to let off steam.

We subsequently asked a firefighter how it made sense from a “fire abatement” standpoint for the City of Oakland, U.C. Berkeley and the East Bay Regional Parks District to cut down hundreds of thousands of trees and spread their chipped remains in thick carpets of decomposing mulch of up to two feet throughout the hills as they are planning to do \*\* and the firefighter responded that in fact it did not make sense, that he agreed the plan was reckless and dangerous, and that as a resident of the hills himself, the plan was a source of great concern to him. When asked if was alone in that opinion, he stated that no, in fact, many of the Oakland firefighters opposed it as he did and for the very same reasons. When further asked why they did not speak out against it, he stated that they had tried to do so, but that their comments were dismissed by upper management as the complaints of “disgruntled union employees” and ultimately, ignored.

But he and they are right. The plan doesn’t make sense, for all the reasons documented and expressed by the U.S. Forest Service, URS, and several others, to wit,

- *Fire Science:*

- According to David Maloney, former Oakland firefighter and Chief of Fire Prevention at the Oakland Army base, "Fire Science has proven that every living tree—regardless of its species—due to its moisture content and canopy coverage of ground fuels, contributes to wildfire hazard mitigation."
- The U.S. Geological Survey notes that only about 3% of fires occur in forests. The remainder—97%—burn mostly in shrublands and grasslands (and urban areas), the exact environment in which the 1991 Firestorm ignited and which native plant ideologues want to recreate in the hills.
- The stated aim of the deforestation effort is to replace the East Bay's Eucalyptus and Monterey Pine forests with shallow grasses, grasses that are highly susceptible to fire and which even the EBRPD has admitted on their website are "one of the most dangerous vegetation types for firefighter safety due to the rapid frontal spread of fire that can catch suppression personnel off guard."

- *Expert Testimony:*

- During the FEMA environmental review process, the U.S. Forest Service weighed in, objecting to the plan to remove all Eucalyptus trees for the following reasons:

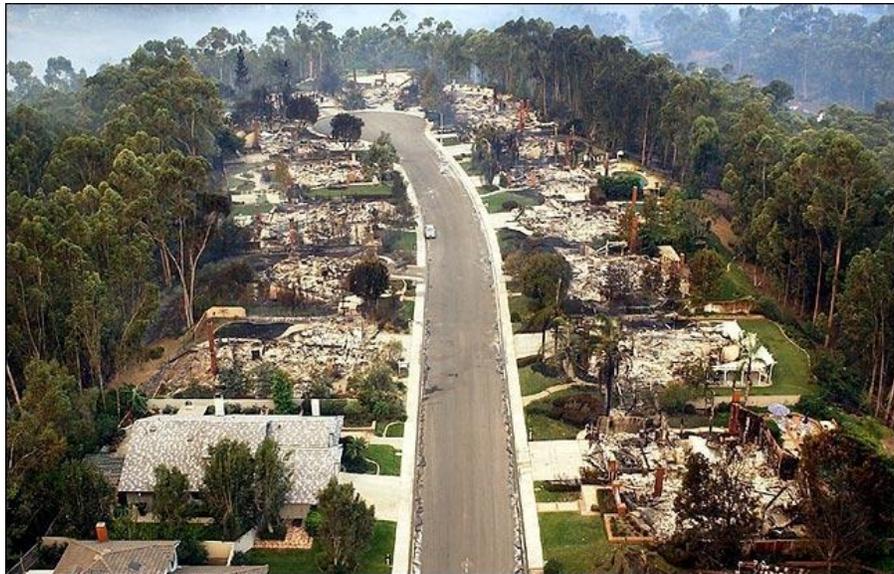
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\*\* The strategy for the 2,059 acres of public lands to be deforested in any area spanning seven East Bay cities is exemplified by the FEMA EIS language for the North Hills-Skyline area near the Caldecott Tunnel in Oakland which reads: “3.4.2.3.1 North Hills-Skyline - This proposed 68-acre proposed project area is on the southwest side of Grizzly Peak Boulevard north of State Route (SR) 24 and above the Caldecott Tunnel. It includes eucalyptus, pine, and brush... Oakland’s goals are to remove eucalyptus and Monterey pine and to convert brush to grassland along Grizzly Peak Boulevard ... Eucalyptus would be chipped, and the chips would be spread over a maximum of 20% of the site at a maximum depth of 24 inches... To suppress resprouting of eucalyptus, the cambium ring of stumps would be chemically treated with a combination of *Garlon4* and *Stalker*... Eucalyptus resprouts and new seedlings would receive follow-up herbicide treatment twice a year with *Garlon4*, *Stalker*, or *Roundup* as required to remove eucalyptus from the site.”

- Removal of the trees would lead to growth of highly flammable brush species: “the removal of the overstory, is likely to result in rapid establishment of native and non-native herbaceous and brush communities, bringing an increase in available surface fuels.”
- Increase in “available surface loads” would “result in increases in potential surface fire behavior” and thus, “a dramatic increase in fire hazard.”
- The U.S. Fire Administration Technical Report on the 1991 Fire noted that “brush fuel types played a significant role in the progression of the fire” and that brushland made up “a large portion of the available fuel.”
- Cutting down tall trees “does little to address the surface fuels which are typically the primary carrier of an advancing fire.”
- “Removal of the eucalyptus overstory would reduce the amount of shading on surface fuels, increase the wind speeds of the forest floor, reduce the relative humidity of the forest floor, increase the fuel temperature, and reduce fuel moisture.”
- These factors would increase the probability of a fire starting and once started, the probability of the fire spreading faster and burning more intensely, the exact opposite of the outcome this plan claims to be seeking. Doing so would “result in a more severe range of fire behavior effects.”

- Experience:

- The Scripps Ranch fire of 2003 burned 150 homes, but not Eucalyptus trees abutting many of those homes as can be seen from this photo:



- When Angel Island erupted in flames in 2008, it was the areas where the Eucalyptus trees were cut down that burned; burned to the very edge of the Eucalyptus forest, then stopped for lack of fuel: “At the edge of this burn belt lie strips of intact tree groves... a torched swath intercut with untouched forest...” (Fagen, K., “After fire, Angel Island is a park of contrasts,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 2008.)

- And as a 1991 Oakland Firestorm survivor writes: "I was a student at Cal during the 1991 fires. I lived in the Berkeley hills above campus near Strawberry Canyon. The eucalyptus and other trees saved the houses on my street by serving as a barrier between us and the fire."

Finally, a study published by the U.S. Forest Service, "Reducing the Wildland Fire Threat to Homes," concludes that reducing the risk to homes from a wildfire does not involve clear cutting vast amount of trees. It shows that "home losses can be effectively reduced by focusing mitigation efforts on the structure [such as requiring a fireproof roof] and its immediate surroundings." The study notes that "ignitions from flames occur over relatively short distances—tens of meters not hundreds of meters." If there are no trees within about 30 feet of a home, there is upwards of a 95% chance the home will not burn. At about 50 feet, there is virtually no chance. It goes on to conclude that cutting down trees not adjacent to homes does nothing to protect those homes: "Extensive wildland vegetation management does not effectively change home ignitability."

And yet his plan does not focus on residences or their immediate surroundings, but rather our public lands and parks. For example, the FEMA EIS notes that the southern area of one of the parks to be targeted—Anthony Chabot Regional Park—is nowhere near structures: "4.10.6.2.2. There are no adjacent communities because the proposed and connected project areas are entirely surrounded by parkland." Why is a plan which claims to be about reducing fire risk for East Bay homes targeting areas where no homes exist? The answer is simple: because the plan is not about wildfire reduction but about "ethnic cleansing" of our collectively owned forests to suit the nativist prejudices of the very few. These factors would increase the probability of a fire starting and once started, the probability of the fire spreading faster and burning more intensely, the exact opposite of what this plan claims to want to do. Doing so would, according to the US Forestry Service, "result in a more severe range of fire behavior effects."

As you can surmise from this, the concerns of critics such as myself are well substantiated and go far beyond the superficial treatment this issue is currently afforded. Moreover, the climate of intolerance for alternative points of view fostered by articles such as yours which unfairly malign dissenters has become so oppressive, others in positions of relevance and authority have chosen to remain silent for fear of enduring the same ridicule. In fact, the firefighter was not the first person in a position of expertise and relevance to this issue we have met who opposes this plan but has failed to share those concerns with a wider, public audience. Individuals tasked with implementing fire abatement strategies for lands overseen by other East Bay public agencies not involved with this agenda have privately expressed the same concerns to us as the firefighter but tragically, remain just as publicly silent. Why? The treatment of critics by local media no doubt serves as cautionary tale about the danger of character assassination for attempting to do so, leaving the public discussion to be dominated by the small, vocal minority who support it (the same people who fanned the flames of the anger that came through in your article).

Though the small number of native plant ideologues who are the primary driving force behind this plan are just that—*small*—and in no way representative of the views of most East Bay citizens who actually oppose this plan, their influence with our public officials—the result of nearly two decades of intensive lobbying for their destructive, native plant agenda—is to credit for their success, and not the validity of their objective nor the number of individuals they represent. This is evident by the 13,000 comments submitted to FEMA during its deliberations, 90% of which were in opposition, as well as the reaction of most people we speak with during our educational leafleting who have no idea this is to occur and often react with incredulity, then anger, that anyone would dare suggest, let alone succeed, in winning the

cooperation of our public officials to destroy that which is most beautiful and iconic about the East Bay hills: the trees. Yet at public meetings and hearings, in the online comments section of articles written by plan opponents, and on various online homeowner's forums where they work to censor and ban from such discussion groups those homeowners who disagree with them, the same handful of individuals with a tenacity wildly disproportionate to their actual numbers dominate the debate and seek to discourage any form of democratic discussion that might hinder their success. Helping them in this endeavor are articles such as yours that likewise disparage critics without first taking the time to fully explore or explain to the public the multifaceted nature of our criticism.

What would it take to elevate the public discussion of this issue and thereby avert a potential disaster in the making? Just one Bay Area journalist to break ranks, to cease being lazy and actually read expert analysis of this plan, and to begin treating this issue with the gravity it deserves—to actually engage in *journalism*. Were just one *journalist* to acknowledge and report on each of the various harms FEMA itself admits will result from this plan, and perhaps most important of all, report on the overwhelming evidence that this plan will exacerbate rather than reduce the risk of fire as claimed, every other news agency in the Bay Area would be forced to evolve their own superficial treatment of the issue to keep up.

Until that happens, public officials in charge of overseeing this plan will keep doing what they have been doing all along: ignoring anyone who opposes this plan, including their constituents who contact them to express concerns to whom they do not even extend the courtesy of a response, and forge headlong into fostering circumstances that could lead to another devastating fire in the hills, increased cancer rates, and bring about each of the other harms FEMA admits are “unavoidable.”

Given that your previous article not only enabled, but participated, in the “group think” mentality that may allow for such disastrous outcomes, you have a responsibility to do better.

I hope you will.

Very truly yours,

Nathan J. Winograd

cc:

Dave Butler, *Contra Costa Times*  
Chip Johnson and Audrey Cooper, *San Francisco Chronicle*  
Kevin Keane, *Oakland Tribune*  
Sophie Ho and Robert Gammon, *East Bay Express*  
Michael Krasny, *KQED*