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Heal the Bay Marks One Year Since Palisades Fire with Findings on Ocean Water Quality and Ongoing Environmental Risks

Los Angeles, CA — January 5, 2026 — One year after the Palisades Fire burned through coastal communities in Los Angeles County, **Heal the Bay** continues to monitor and analyze how wildfire contaminants, debris, and cleanup activities may be affecting ocean water quality, marine ecosystems, and public health in Santa Monica Bay.

Since January 2025, Heal the Bay has conducted extensive water quality monitoring and analysis to better understand the presence and potential impacts of wildfire-related contaminants in coastal waters. In the absence of regulatory standards for wildfire contaminants in recreational waters, scientists have relied on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) **Risk Screening Level (RSL) Calculator**, the only available federal tool for assessing potential human health risk. While the RSL tool was developed to evaluate exposure to individual contaminants in air, drinking water, and soil, it is currently the best available framework for contextualizing wildfire-related water quality data in the absence of established recreational public health standards.

Water quality data collected by Heal the Bay and the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board from January through May 2025 indicate that the risk from ocean recreation to humans appears to be low when compared to EPA Risk Screening Levels. However, Heal the Bay emphasizes that these screening levels have important limitations and should not be interpreted as definitive measures of safety.

“Risk screening levels are not safety thresholds,” said Tracy Quinn, President and CEO of Heal the Bay. “They do not account for cumulative exposure to multiple contaminants, pre-existing health conditions, or sensitive life stages such as pregnancy. Without appropriate regulatory standards, we cannot definitively say the ocean is safe. Heal the Bay is calling on state leaders to advance legislation and policy solutions that establish clear responsibility for post-fire water sampling, standardized testing protocols, and public health benchmarks for recreational exposure to wildfire-related contaminants—so communities are better protected in future climate disasters.”

Ongoing Risks to Marine Life

While risk from ocean recreation to humans appears low, Heal the Bay's early monitoring points to potential risks for marine organisms that have a much lower tolerance for contamination as they remain continuously immersed in coastal waters. Over time, pollutants can move through and accumulate within the marine food web, potentially affecting fish, wildlife, and people who consume locally caught seafood.

The marine ecosystems offshore from Malibu have not fully recovered from the 2018 Woolsey Fire, and ash has been observed on the ocean floor following the Palisades Fire. Heal the Bay has

conducted sampling of this ash to determine its potential to leach heavy metals and other contaminants into the water column or food chain over time. Further research is needed to understand the full ecological impact of the Palisades Fire and identify actions that could support long-term recovery of marine habitats.

Ongoing Monitoring and New Research Partnerships

To better understand longer-term impacts, Heal the Bay investigated offshore conditions between **April** and **August** to inform potential cleanup opportunities and collected additional near-shore water samples after rain events in **October, November, and December 2025** in partnership with researchers at **UCLA**. Sampling focused on stormwater outfalls and included testing for bacteria, turbidity, and wildfire-related contaminants. Our partners at UCLA are processing the samples and we hope to have results soon.

Heal the Bay will continue contributing data to regional and academic studies to help close critical gaps in understanding how wildfire affects coastal water quality over time. However, sustained monitoring and research of this magnitude requires consistent public investment. Relying on nonprofits to shoulder this responsibility alone leaves critical gaps in oversight and long-term data continuity. Additional public funding is needed to ensure this essential work continues at the scale required to protect public health and coastal ecosystems. In the meantime, organizations like Heal the Bay need additional support to maintain monitoring efforts and further understand impacts.

Cleanup Efforts and Remaining Gaps

While cleanup efforts began quickly in some areas following the fire, Heal the Bay has raised concerns about delays in removing debris from some remaining parcels.

Heal the Bay has identified **Palisades Bowl**, a mobile home community located on Pacific Coast Highway where burned cars, appliances, and household items have been untouched for nearly a year, as the **most critical remaining site** to address to prevent further contamination of coastal waters. Heal the Bay has sent a letter to the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board asking the Board to use its regulatory authority to compel the City of Los Angeles to complete cleanup without further delay.

“Completing cleanup at Palisades Bowl is a significant gap in the efforts to stop pollution from entering the ocean,” Quinn said. “Protecting ecosystems and public health depends on finishing the job—and doing it right.”

Impact of EPA Hazardous Materials Facility at Topanga Beach on Coastal Water Quality

In late January 2025, Heal the Bay became aware of the EPA’s plan to use California State Parks land adjacent to Topanga Creek and Lagoon as a staging and sorting area for hazardous materials during Phase 1 debris removal. Heal the Bay immediately requested a meeting with EPA

officials, expressing concerns about the site's proximity to ecological and culturally sensitive areas.

On January 30, 2025, Heal the Bay leadership had a phone call with EPA representatives to advocate for alternative staging locations and stronger safeguards. Following a site visit on February 8 and ongoing advocacy, operational changes were implemented, including relocating lithium-ion battery processing away from Topanga ahead of major rain events.

Water quality data collected before and after these changes show **significant increases in several heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) on February 6**, followed by improvements after best management practices were strengthened.

“These findings underscore the importance of careful planning and site selection during emergency response,” Quinn said. “We hope future wildfire responses will prioritize locations and practices that fully protect public health, waterways, and wildlife.”

Community Engagement: Ash to Action

To keep the public informed, Heal the Bay will host an **Ash to Action Science Tent** on January **17, 2026, Beach Cleanup**, where community members can learn directly from scientists about current findings, remaining uncertainties, and what ongoing research means for the coast.

About Heal the Bay

Heal the Bay is a nonprofit environmental organization dedicated to making coastal waters safe, healthy, and clean for people and marine life. For more than 40 years, Heal the Bay has combined science, advocacy, education, and community action to protect the health of Santa Monica Bay and coastal waters across California.

For more information, visit **healththebay.org/ash-to-action**.