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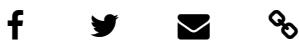
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Could A Phone App Help Prevent California Wildfires?

• [Ezra David Romero](#)

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Ph.D. student Mike Johnson uses Evalutree to assess the health and economic value of oak woodlands.

Courtesy of University of California Agriculture & Natural Resources

Some of California's largest wildfires in recent history were started when trees or branches fell on power lines. As a result, a judge this [week](#) ordered PG&E to increase power line inspections, upgrade records of equipment used and to hire more tree-trimmer supervisors.

All the while, a scientist says he has a solution for tracking problem trees, which in turn could prevent wildfires.

[Matteo Garbelotto](#), a University of California Cooperative Extension forest pathology specialist based at UC Berkeley, has developed a tool to tell if a tree is healthy. He named the app "[Evalutree](#)."

"It's not that the app is miraculous," he said. "It won't predict precisely what's going to happen, but it will help you manage and you will justify your actions better."

He came up with the idea because agencies, like PG&E, were using "pencil and paper" to track tree health, a method he says is not efficient.

"Using a tablet or phone, the data could be shipped directly, in real time, to the San Francisco office," he said. "Using a phone or GPS device, you will know the precise location of the tree and know the worker did the job. If there's a fire, you have proof."

In response, he says the PG&E Corporation Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the utility, gave him a \$70,000 grant to develop the app.

With his tracking app, surveyors would log information like whether a tree is leaning towards a line, has any visible obvious signs of internal decay or if there are any wounds on the outside of the tree.

"If there is a mushroom or conk growing on the tree, that portion of the tree is dead and the branch or whole tree may fall down," he said.

Once the data is collected, his system rates the trees — purple being the most at-risk and green being the least.

He says PG&E isn't using the exact app he created, but is using the technology and information he created for their own process. Garbelotto says now the app is sort of an open-source product that can be altered to an agency's needs.

"The tool will provide benefits for other utilities and the forestry industry as they work to create safe and healthy forests," Stephanie Isaacson, director of community relations for PG&E, said in a release.

Garbelotto says the app could be specialized for cities and companies that manage trees. It could even be used for campgrounds or parks to calculate the risk of a tree falling, which have killed campers in places like Yosemite National Park.

"This could be very easily used by a city to red-flag older trees that need to be taken care of," he said. "That's what I'm hoping is going to happen."

The tool has already changed the work of UC Berkeley Ph.D students like Michael Johnson, who relied on pencil and paper as well when evaluating tree species. Johnson studies forest pathology and says Evalutree has simplified his work.

"We would spend weeks doing data entry, trying to make out the scrawled numbers and notes," he said. "At the end of the day ... we simply upload all of our surveys for the day, and I immediately have my data and reports in multiple formats."

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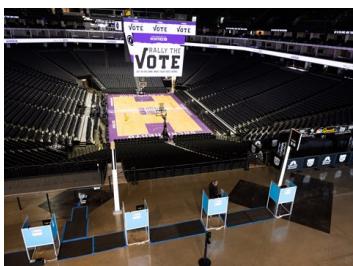
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