

Communities, Corporations, Climate

Insurance, Risk, and Resilience in a Changing World

Fri, May 29, 12-1:30 pm [by zoom only](#)

Climate change is reshaping every system it touches. This panel examines one that most people haven't much considered in climate terms: insurance. When the industry built to share risk retreats from it, the consequences fall hardest on communities least able to absorb them. Three panelists examine what that failure looks like from the inside, where financial instruments to do better already exist, and what it would take to build a system designed for the world we are actually in.

Simon Penny takes us to the heart of the problem. While for most, the Eaton Fire is a dim memory, Penny is (still) an evacuee. In Jan '25, nearly 10,000 buildings burned in the Eaton fire, and a similar number remain contaminated and uninhabitable. Likely the most toxic urban fire in US history, the Eaton Fire is a harbinger of a growing new phenomenon: Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) fires, where plastics and electronics in buildings and vehicles create novel environmental toxins, which in LA were driven across the city by winds of over 100 mph.



Residents are often unaware of the presence of high levels of toxins, carcinogens, and forever chemicals such fires produce. Community members face huge bills for abatement and remediation, while insurance companies issue denials to long-time policyholders and curtail coverage of properties in newly declared "fire zones." State agencies, similarly, have failed to recognize or respond to the scale of the problem. In the absence of state support, community-activist and citizen-science organizations have emerged to advocate for victims. Simon will offer a firsthand account of what thousands are experiencing, abandoned by insurance companies, multiple state agencies, and the very algorithms of risk and restitution that underpin the entire fragile edifice of property and value.

Simon Penny is professor in Art at UC Irvine with appointments in Music and Informatics. He specialises in media art and digital cultures theory, embodied cognition and history of technology. His new monograph *Skill: Making, Cognition, Neuroscience* is in press with Routledge (more at simonpenny.net).

Mike Beck directs our attention to the coastal risks growing due to climate change, development, and habitat loss. Mike's team assesses coastal risks, values the adaptation benefits of nature, and identifies innovative solutions to reduce risks to people, property and nature. In identifying innovative solutions, Mike has worked closely with the risk industry to incorporate nature in risk models, develop reef insurance, and new investment opportunities through wetland resilience credits. Mike will describe recent successes in these partnerships as well as shortcomings in public and private progress in risk reduction and climate adaptation efforts.



Michael W. Beck is the Director of the [Center for Coastal Climate Resilience](#) & AXA Chair in Coastal Resilience at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was Lead Marine Scientist at The Nature Conservancy for 20 years. He collaborates with many agencies and companies including the World Bank, US Army Corp, FEMA, AXA and many reinsurance firms. He has authored more than 100 papers and numerous op-eds in major papers, including the *LA Times* and *NY Times*. He has been a Fulbright Fellow and a Pew Marine Fellow.

Josh Harrison argues that the insurance industry's retreat from climate risk is not a market failure but a systems failure, one that reveals how deeply insurance functions as social infrastructure. His talk will examine why the current pricing and underwriting model is structurally blind to prevention, what that blindness costs communities that can least afford it, and what a different institutional architecture might look like.

Josh Harrison is Director of the UCSC [Center for the Study of the Force Majeure](#), an organization that brings together artists, scientists, Indigenous knowledge keepers, and policy thinkers on climate resilience. Working at the intersection of these fields, he has developed a structural analysis of insurance industry failure in the climate era, published in the essay series [Avoiding an Uninsurable Future](#).



Moderator: UCSC Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Economics **Dan Friedman**