



104 years ago today, the earth shook in San Francisco, igniting devastating fires that destroyed the city. But the impact of the fire was greater than just the loss of property and life: [Robert Richter](#) argues that the nationwide sympathy for San Francisco helped revitalize the otherwise flagging campaign in the United States Congress to dam the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite. Many people blamed the fire on the lack of a good water supply in the city, as the existing system failed from multiple pipe ruptures. Water from Hetch Hetchy promised to supplant the private monopoly that ran the city's system and guarantee that such a fire wouldn't happen again.

But San Francisco had opportunities to build an auxiliary water supply for fighting fires before 1906 and had failed to do so. As UC Berkeley historian [Stephen Tobriner describes](#) (son of late California Supreme Court Justice Matthew Tobriner and a family friend), just two years before the fire, Fire Chief Dennis Sullivan testified before the San Francisco Board of Supervisors about the need for an auxiliary water supply that he hoped would be built within the year. However, only after the fire did the city follow through on Sullivan's recommendations. Tragically, Sullivan died from injuries sustained from collapsing rubble caused by the quake. The system that he proposed is now [in need of an upgrade](#), with a bond measure on the June ballot in San Francisco for that purpose.

But perhaps the greatest irony of all is that just four days after the fire, on April 22nd, rain blanketed the Bay Area. Had it arrived a few days earlier, much of the city, and perhaps even Hetch Hetchy Valley, might have been saved.