

## ***Environment***

# ***Millions of Californians Lost Power Because PG&E Refused to Spend Money to Fix Its Problems***

*“I can’t say how frustrated I am,” says a city councilor in Paradise, a town that was completely razed by the 2018 fires caused by PG&E.*

**By Madeleine Gregory**

Oct 11 2019, 7:19am

THE CITY OF OAKLAND WITHOUT POWER, AS THE SUN RISES OVER THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE WEDNESDAY MORNING. PHOTO: JANE TYSKA/MEDIANEWS GROUP/THE MERCURY NEWS VIA GETTY IMAGES

On Wednesday, much of Northern California **went dark.**

Residents in 34 California counties received just a day’s warning before **their lights went out.** As weather conditions created increased wildfire risk, Pacific Gas and Electric, the same utility that **caused many of the deadliest fires** in California’s recent history, shut off the power rather than **shoulder the cost of fixing its old, crumbling infrastructure.**

Just last year, the Camp Fire—California’s most **destructive ever**, sparked by PG&E's decrepit equipment—razed the town of Paradise nearly to the ground. Residents fled the flames, many landing in the nearby city of Chico. Emergency services were stretched thin, rebuilding efforts slow, and compensation even slower. On Wednesday, Paradise and Chico were two of the cities plunged into darkness by PG&E.

At the peak, as many as 738,000 customers were **without power**. Though less than the projected 800,000 customer accounts, that is still estimated to affect over **2 million Californians**. The first shut-offs started on Wednesday, when PG&E cut power to over 500,000 customers. The second round of outages—supposed to affect over 200,000 customers the Bay Area—was supposed to occur at noon Wednesday, but were delayed until much later than night. **According to PG&E's latest count** Thursday evening, some 311,000 customers were still without power.

PG&E has said that shutting off power was the safest option to prevent more wildfires, but this sidesteps the simple fact that PG&E has not invested enough to make its electric grid safe and reliable. The company has faced so many lawsuits over fires caused by its poor infrastructure maintenance that it **filed for bankruptcy in January**. At this point, PG&E's financial situation and rising costs of deferred maintenance have left essentially left the company unprepared to reliably provide power to Californians. As VICE reported last year:

Investors and analysts have said PG&E is worth around \$20 billion, and the company still has the cash on hand to keep the state's lights on—just not enough to cover presumed tens of billions in eventual wildfire liabilities. Or, apparently, to maintain the equipment that allegedly caused those fires. The federal judge overseeing PG&E's ongoing probation presented a safety proposal for the utility that would see 650,000 workers remove 100 million trees and inspect and repair thousands of miles of line. PG&E **claimed** the plan would cost \$150 billion.

“Our website crashed several times. Our maps are inconsistent and maybe in correct. Our call centers were overloaded,” PG&E CEO Bill Johnson said in a Thursday press conference. “To put it simply, we were not adequately prepared to support the operational event.”

To some, electricity is a life or death matter: those with breathing machines or insulin stored in the fridge **cannot go days** without power, especially when they don't know when it'll turn back on. For those working hourly wages, loss of a few days of work can be a big hit.

In towns across Northern California, grocery stores **flooded** with people stockpiling canned goods and candles, and people lined up to stock up on **gas and batteries**. Many considered buying generators, especially if this was to become something of a new normal.

As these planned blackouts threaten to become a fixture of California life, communities are scrambling to determine how to care for the most vulnerable residents and maintain public safety.

“I can’t say how frustrated I am. It’s ridiculous that this is the long-term solution.”

The most potent feeling in this power shutoff is uncertainty. PG&E shuts off power with little warning and no set end time, leaving communities to figure out how best to care for themselves. PG&E’s website went down sporadically throughout the day on Wednesday, meaning many people couldn’t even tell if their address was in the planned outage zones.

“They don’t tell us when they’ll turn the power back on, which makes it hard to plan,” said Michael Zuccillo, a councilmember in Paradise. “Schools are closed, parents are trying to work and they can’t work and they can’t find daycare.”

According to Zuccillo, nearly all of Paradise is dark, with only a few businesses equipped with backup generators. This isn’t the first time PG&E has turned off their power, either—sitting squarely in the danger zone, Paradise has had their lights shut off multiple times this fire season.

“I can’t say how frustrated I am,” Zuccillo said. “It’s ridiculous that this is the long-term solution.”

Mad Stano, the program director at the California Environmental Justice Alliance, said that they were disappointed with PG&E's communication about the outage, noting that if you don't speak one of the six languages (including English) the alerts were offered in, you're out of luck.

"Linguistically isolated, low-income, and medically impacted residents will all have a harder time in these emergencies. Even I, an energy professional, could not figure out what was going to happen when, where, and how long," Stano said. "Utilities are in this role where they have all the power and they quite literally take it away from us."

Chico and Paradise are still in the process of rebuilding from the 2018 fires, building new homes and repairing infrastructure. According to Zuccillo, much of that construction is halted when the power shuts off.

Randall Stone, the mayor of Chico, echoed similar concerns. Chico's population **ballooned** after people fled Paradise last year, but many people still live in RVs or other temporary housing. The city is trying to help residents get back on their feet, but with limited resources. Stone said that they **asked the state** for \$6 million in mitigation, but the state only allocated \$3 million.

"We've been already traumatized. We're a community that's trying to pull it together," said Stone. "This is just another blow."

In Morgan Hill, a small city in Silicon Valley, the council decided to implement a curfew. The curfew started at 8 pm and stretched to 6:30 am Thursday, intended to deter crimes in the darkened city. This summer, Chico's police department considered **a similar measure**, but council decided against it, worried that it would do more to criminalize homeless people and night workers than keep people safe.

Morgan Hill's mayor, Rich Constantine, said that this curfew is not meant to affect people outside their homes or businesses. Instead, it's intended to give law enforcement more power to monitor the community. "Some people will unfortunately take advantage of others' suffering," Constantine said.

Tuesday night, police in Morgan Hill arrested two people suspected of **burglarizing a car**. They tweeted that the arrestees were trying to "take advantage" of the power outage.

Amidst ad hoc attempts to mitigate the community impacts of these power outages, conversations have begun around how to transition the state's energy system to meet the constraints of a warming climate.

With the fires (and subsequent lawsuits) of the past few years, utilities have become risk averse, said Charles Kolstad, a professor at Stanford focusing on environmental economics. To ensure a safer grid, PG&E would have to invest

in longer-term maintenance solutions, but those wouldn't reduce their liability in the event of a fire.

Though PG&E's sparking lines have started recent fires, they aren't the only ones responsible. Stephanie Pincetl, a UCLA professor of environmental policies, points to poor land-use planning that forces utilities into fire-prone areas. Developers are allowed to build houses farther and farther into the forest with the expectation that they will be as connected as if they lived in the heart of town. A start, she said, would be to value fire insurance properly to reflect the high risk of building and living in these areas—right now, these homes are cheaper than those in the city, encouraging further flight and development.

“A resilient 21st century grid is not independent from how we build and what we build,” Pincetl said.

As the climate changes and wildfire season lengthens in California, many policy experts are demanding that we reimagine the grid as a whole. The system we have now was built throughout the 20th century, with expectations of a stable climate and a goal of satisfying ever-growing demands of consumption.

One option is to adopt an expanding system of "microgrids" like the kinds used in hospitals and military bases, and which cities like San Diego are already **pioneering** as a community strategy.

In this scenario, cities could use solar or wind energy to generate their own power and store it, and then provide whole communities with clean energy during power outages. This process, called "islanding" communities, ensures more resilience in the face of continuing power outages. It also gets rid of the need for so many wires running through dense underbrush and parched hills.

"This could ultimately evolve to a state-wide system," said Woody Hastings, the energy program manager at the Climate Center, a nonprofit focused on forward-looking solutions to the climate crisis. "Each community would provide a lot of power and store it locally or regionally, but communities would still be integrated and able to share."

"If ever there was an opportunity to change how we do things," he said, "the climate crisis is it. The time is now."

Another strategy that has gained traction in recent years is Community Choice Aggregation (CCA). In a CCA, municipalities can **purchase power** on behalf of their residents and businesses from greener, cleaner sources, while still receiving distribution and transmission services from the utility. Stone said that he's currently working to set up a CCA in Chico, and that it's one of



his major goals as mayor. While CCAs don't take communities off the grid (they'd still be affected by outages), it can help in the long-term transition to a cleaner, more sustainable energy system.

PG&E's power shutoffs are a stopgap measure, one which mitigates the risk of a failing electrical grid without addressing the core problems. No solution can be rolled out overnight, or even over months: it takes the careful restructuring of our systems to meet the demands of a changing world.

Johanna Bozuwa, who works on climate and energy with the thinktank the Democracy Collective, is an advocate for public ownership of utilities, said that we should start treating electricity as a public good.

"For me, this is an example of how we are having pretty significant privatization of the gains and big payouts while the losses are socialized, and held by those who are most vulnerable to climate change," she said.