

# PG&E fire-safety shutdowns: 'We're all freaking out about it'

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UPDATED: June 24, 2019 at 10:45 am

June 23,  
2019

In a large office overlooking the San Francisco Bay Bridge, PG&E's wildfire-safety analysts keep watch 24/7, monitoring streams of images and data from satellites, weather stations, forest cameras and emergency responders. Sitting in front of dual monitors at work stations, with a wall of giant screens in front of them, they track winds, temperatures, humidity and the dryness of vegetation to calculate wildfire risk across Northern California. Under a new PG&E program to reduce the threat of its power lines sparking fires, these are the people whose work could get your power shut off even if your community is not in danger.

Under the embattled utility's new Public Safety Power Shutoff program, when the analysts in this Wildfire Safety Operations Center determine conditions have reached a threshold for fire risk in an area, company officials will activate an emergencycenter in the basement of a building next door, and begin cutting power to electricity lines. That means that communities that aren't at risk but get power from the same lines could also be blacked out. Any of the utility's 5 million customers could be affected for several hours or "multiple days," according to PG&E.

"That is why we are telling all of our customers to be prepared because it is possible that you could be some distance from the problem area and experience a public safety power shutoff," said PG&E spokesman Jeff Smith.

As the utility seeks to limit the threat of fires sparked by power lines in what it calls a "new normal" of massive fire risk from drought, widespread tree deaths, record heat waves and "extremely strong" windstorms, its program has ushered in a new era in Northern California that's forcing everyone to prepare for blackouts that could come without notice. The company says in an [online fact sheet](#) that it will give customers up to 48 hours advance notice of shutdowns — "when possible." PG&E is urging customers to update their contact information with the utility for calls, texts and email notifications, and offering [tips to prepare](#).

The program, similar to one in effect in Southern California for years, has already raised concerns as health care providers, restaurant owners and others scramble to figure out how to power electricity-dependent medical devices, air conditioning, appliances and more during a shutdown.

Jason Belden, a disaster-preparation manager for the California Association of Health Facilities, which represents 1,300 skilled-nursing facilities and intermediate-care facilities, worries about a worst-case scenario if back-up power isn't immediately available to patients who rely on oxygen, dialysis or other life-sustaining equipment. "You could kill people right away," he said.

For Alan Carlson, chef and owner at Italian Colors in the Oakland hills, PG&E's new program came as a shock. "We're all worrying and freaking out about it," Carlson said, noting that power outages can cause problems that range from filling a restaurant with smoke when kitchen fans shut down to spoiled food. "We maybe have to get a generator, at least for the walk-ins and freezer. It's pretty darn scary."

Since the shutoff program was approved by California regulators in May, PG&E has turned off power due to fire risk in two areas. One day earlier this month, power was cut to 1,700 customers in Solano, Napa and Yolo counties and to some 21,000 customers in Butte and Yuba counties. Both shutdowns lasted less than a day, PG&E said.

The utility did its first preventative power shutdown last year, but that was only for distribution lines, which carry power shorter distances than transmission lines. That outage, in the North Bay and Sierra Foothills, left 60,000 customers in the dark for four days.

"The changing conditions in climate throughout the state and ... extreme weather events driven by climate change have caused unanticipated wildfires in our state primarily over the last couple of years," Smith said. "We've been looking at how can we best keep our customers safe."

After devastating fires in Southern California, the state Public Utilities Commission in 2012 gave San Diego Gas & Electric approval to run a program that's been a model for PG&E's plan. However, although a commission review of two 2017 shutdowns by the San Diego-based utility found the blackouts were a "reasonable" response to fire risk, the commission concluded that even five years after the program was approved, there had been multiple complaints about last-minute or non-existent warnings of shutdowns, and the utility's provision of back-up power was inconsistent.

PG&E, which filed for bankruptcy in January seeking relief from billions of dollars in debts and liabilities following a series of deadly wildfires that torched Northern California over the past two years, says it expects it will restore power after public-safety shutdowns within 24 to 48 hours once extreme weather conditions have subsided.



The Camp Fire rages in Magalia Nov. 9, 2018, as Sacramento Metropolitan firefighters battle the flames. The fire burned for 18 days and was determined fully contained when rainstorms hit the area. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group file)

Large areas of the hills surrounding the Peninsula and East Bay are “extreme” fire-threat areas, and most of the rest of the Bay Area’s heights have “elevated” risk, according to the Public Utilities Commission. PG&E says electric lines passing through such areas are the most likely to be shut off for public safety.

Nursing homes and other care facilities worry about what could happen if an outage persists. Back-up power systems typically don’t provide effective air conditioning, and facilities where frail seniors live would have to be evacuated, leading to “transfer trauma,” said Belden. “About 10 percent of those residents are going to die in the next three months just simply because of that evacuation,” he said.

If, for example, during the 2018 Carr Fire in the Redding area, PG&E had shut down power to that city while temperatures were hitting 115 degrees, every resident of skilled-nursing homes and intermediate-care facilities serving the mentally disabled would’ve had to be evacuated, Belden said. “It could be really, really bad,” he said.



Redding is under evacuation as the Carr fire makes its way into the city. A long line of traffic on Buenaventura Blvd. along Benton Air Park. Credit: Hung T. Vu/Special to the Redding Record Searchlight

PG&E, which recently agreed to pay \$1 billion to local governments for damage from fires in 2015, 2017 and 2018, acknowledges that while the blackouts may shield it from liability for causing fires, shutting off power carries its own threats. "It's not a decision that we make lightly," Smith said.

Although state and federal law requires backup power systems for hospitals, skilled-nursing facilities, intermediate-care facilities and long-term care facilities, many people who get home care or live in hospices, assisted-living or group homes don't have generators to power medical devices, said Corrigan Gommenginger, CEO of Advanced Home Health and Hospice, which provides home-based services in the East Bay and other areas of the state.

Gommenginger thinks PG&E's program falls short. "Our public utilities have a real responsibility to consumers to be able to provide us safe energy, and we shouldn't have to worry about ... trees rubbing against the lines," he said. "Turning off people's electricity to prevent fires is a band-aid. The real response should be, 'How can we deliver safe energy to everybody all of the time?'"