

California May Go Dark This Summer, and Most Aren't Ready



Guests watch a show near a statue of Walt Disney and Micky Mouse in front of the Cinderella Castle at the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., on Jan. 9, 2019. (John Raoux/AP Photo)

A plan by California's biggest utility to cut power on high-wind days during the onrushing wildfire season could plunge millions of residents into darkness. And the vast majority isn't ready for it.

The plan by PG&E Corp. comes after the bankrupt utility said a transmission line that snapped in windy weather probably started last year's Camp Fire, the deadliest in state history. While the plan may end one problem, it creates another as Californians seek ways to deal with what some fear could be days and days of blackouts.

Some residents are turning to other power sources, a boon for home battery systems marketed by Sunrun Inc., Tesla Inc., and Vivint Solar Inc. But the

numbers of those systems in use are relatively small when compared with PG&E's 5.4 million customers. Meanwhile, Governor Gavin Newsom said he's budgeting \$75 million to help communities deal with the threat.

"I'm worried," Newsom said May 9 during a budget briefing in Sacramento. "We're all worried about it for the elderly. We're worried about it because we could see people's power shut off not for a day or two but potentially a week."

Six of the 10 most destructive wildfires in California history have come in the last 18 months, killing 123 people, and often shutting down large sections of the state's electrical grid.

The wildfire season usually starts around June and runs through December, exacerbated by strong winds that race through the state and dry conditions that turn brush and plants into tinder.

PG&E has warned the city of Calistoga that it could cut service as many as 15 times this fire season, said Chris Canning, mayor of the Napa Valley town scarred by wildfires two years ago. But in an interview, the company's vice president of electric operations, Aaron Johnson, said the number will depend on how extreme the weather is.

The utility also plans to set up dozens of so-called "resiliency centers," Johnson said by telephone, where backup generators can be brought in to run essential services. An initial pilot center is being built near Calistoga, he said.

Canning said his community is working on its own solution. He's looking at developing a small network of microgrids consisting of solar panels and batteries, which would allow his community to function when PG&E pulls the plug.

Streetlights Dark

The Calistoga mayor started seriously exploring the option after PG&E, fearing wildfire risk, cut power for nearly two days last fall, plunging his town into darkness. The outage meant assisted living facilities were crippled, streetlights were dark and gas pumps wouldn't work. At the time, hardly anyone in the town had a backup generator, he said.

"If this is the new normal, we have to accommodate for it," Canning said.

The Camp Fire in November, along with fires from the prior year, exposed PG&E to an estimated \$30 billion or more in claims from blazes, hastening its January bankruptcy. Since then, the utility giant has been under pressure to better ensure that its equipment won't spark fires. Earlier this year, PG&E said it would widen the scope of its power shutoffs to include high-transmission power lines, potentially impacting nearly 10 times the number of customers compared to an earlier plan.

The state's other investor-owned utilities also have shutoff programs, but on a smaller scale than PG&E.

'Challenging Program'

"It's a very challenging program and not a decision that we take lightly given the safety risks that exist on either side," PG&E's Johnson said. It's also part of a larger utility program designed to reduce the likelihood of wildfires including stepped up tree trimming, inspections, grid repairs, and hardening, he added.

PG&E has been holding meetings and planning exercises with local and state officials as part of its preparations, Johnson said.

The utility aims to give at least two days warning about a shutoff and has embarked on a public awareness campaign including mailing letters to customers and is working to identify vulnerable residents. It also will be working to get power restored in a day after a shutoff, though its customers could be out for as many as five days, according to Johnson.

State regulators, meanwhile, have said they're developing shutoff notification guidelines for PG&E and all of the state's utilities, requiring them to coordinate with state and local agencies. They want PG&E to use shutoffs as a last resort.

Solar-Battery Combinations

At the same time, the prospect of power outages is driving up interest in solar-battery combinations, said Sunrun Chief Executive Officer Lynn Jurich in an interview last week.

"Wildfire outages are going to continue to happen," she said. "It's not just a this-

year thing.”

Melvin Hoagland is already sold. He lost power for seven days at his home on the edge of Sonoma, California from the 2017 wildfires. All the food in the house rotted, causing a terrible smell that lasted for months. So he had Sunrun install a 9-kilowatt system comprised of 27 solar panels and one battery for his 2,100 square-foot home.

The system will power four rooms for about 8 to 12 hours during a power outage, according to Sunrun.

In 2016, less than 400 homeowners had a home battery system, according to BloombergNEF. Almost 10,000 units were in place last year. The average cost: About \$16,400 with incentives.

Hoagland said he opted for a zero-down, 20-year home-solar and battery-service agreement. He’s glad he did, given PG&E’s blackout warnings.

“We were interested in becoming more independent,” he said. “It’s a very insecure feeling when they’re going to cut power off.”

By Mark Chediak & Brian Eckhouse

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