

Still no utility power shutoffs for Del Norte County

October 26, 2019



Pacific Gas and Electric Co. (PG&E) cut electricity to around 180,000 California customers on Thursday in its fifth public safety power shutoff since June.

Doing so was an effort to curtail the likelihood of wildfires, given weather conditions that included high winds in danger of sparking the dry, wooded landscape.

And those outages likely will not stop any time soon, according to the company's chief executive. By Friday morning, PG&E had cut power to areas of Sonoma County, 75 miles north of San Francisco, where the Kincade Fire has burned 21,900 acres. Firefighters had that blaze only 5% contained, according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

The National Weather Service is predicting extreme fire weather this weekend - hot temperatures, low humidity, high winds.

Meantime, the utility that covers Del Norte County - Pacific Power - said it would follow similar shutdown procedures if wildfire conditions rose here.

Del Norte County currently has less of a threat of wildfires, but if necessary, Pacific Power most likely would follow PG&E's steps. Earlier in 2019, the company added a policy to its wildfire safety plan stating it would cut power if the weather produced unsafe conditions, such as high winds and hot temperatures.

Pacific Power determines its customers' risk of a power shutoff by following CalFire's risk standard and maps, said Drew Hanson, a spokesman for Pacific Power. CalFire rates different sections of California by their level of fire danger.

Del Norte County traditionally has faced less danger. "As weather changes from year to year, that could change as well, but at the moment, it seems unlikely that Del Norte County would receive a public safety power shutoff," Hanson said.

"Following the 2017 and 2018 wildfires, we implemented this program to reduce wildfire threats," said Hanson, although the utility has yet to conduct any fire safety power shutoffs since adding that protocol.

Hanson said Pacific Power would alert customers up to 48 hours before a planned outage, then update them throughout the process using phone calls, texts and emails. He urged customers to keep current contact information on their account in case of a power outage.

PG&E initiated public safety power shutoffs in June, the largest of which left over 700,000 customers without power. And now, PG&E again has turned off the switch to customers, predicting even more power outages over the weekend.

"This is part of a larger power safety program, so this is in response to the increased fire weather we are seeing," said Deanna Contreras, a PG&E spokesperson.

In an emergency meeting Oct. 18, the company's chief executive, William D. Jonson, declared that these preemptive shutoffs could last for up to a decade, although they should lessen in frequency, the Los Angeles Times reported.

The California Public Utilities Commission established guidelines for investor-owned utility companies, such as PG&E, to implement public safety power shutoffs, or "de-energizing," to halt power in case of increased fire risk, in 2018.

The commission added more guidelines in May 2019, following the deadliest fire season in California, according to a news article by CNN.