

Fire Power! Pacific Power has no plans to pull the local plug

July 20, 2019



A Pacific Power representative has told Crescent City officials there is no plan to shut off electricity locally in response to extreme wildfire threats.

Downed power lines have caused massive fires across California in past years, leaving utilities to face steep rehabilitation costs.

During a July 15 meeting of the Crescent City Council, Pacific Power regional business manager Monte Mendenhall said he wanted to address concerns and rumors that the company might pull the electrical plug here should fire danger peak.

Mendenhall said nothing could be further from the truth — the transmission system that serves the county from southern Oregon is not affected by the utility's wildfire-mitigation plans.

Mendenhall said Del Norte County does not have areas marked out to “proactively de-energize.”

However, he said, parts of Siskiyou County ... such as Happy Camp, plus along the I-5 corridor south of Dunsmuir ... are included in wildfire-mitigation planning.

Those “tier 3” have a protocol established for reducing energy consumption to minimize the risk of wildfire, said Mendenhall.

“Tier 2” areas around Del Norte County do have accelerated inspection and repair schedules, as well as a focus on managing vegetation, said Mendenhall.

He said Crescent City lies in a “tier 1” area, with no additional mitigation actions or protocol required.

Mendenhall added that Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) radio advertisements may have caused some confusion for local residents because that utility company does have “proactive de-energization” protocols for its “tier 2” and “tier 3” locales.

But, Mendenhall said, PG&E does not serve the local area.

Crescent City Mayor Blake Inscore thanked Mendenhall for the information and for clarifying Pacific Power’s strategies. There were no questions from the council.

In 2008, fears related to wildfire and Santa Ana-like wind conditions led San Diego Gas & Electric Co. to develop an energy use-reduction plan for short periods in times of high fire risk.

That plan later was adopted by the California Public Utilities Commission.

A number of damaging, deadly fires have occurred since then, spurring creation of Senate Bill 901, passed in 2018 and requiring all industrial utilities, such as Pacific Power, to engage in wildfire-mitigation planning.

SB 901 addressed two major challenges for the state of California:

- controlling the growth and build-up of the vegetation that feeds fires
- reducing the financial burden that fires put on utility companies.

Rural legislators called for more efforts to remove fire fuels from overgrown forests and coastal regions, pushing for \$1 billion over five years out of the state’s cap-and-trade climate program.

Under SB 901, utilities must provide details regarding vegetation removal and electricity shutoff plans.

Utility regulators review and approve wildfire-mitigation plans to ensure accountability when the smoke clears.

Also, regulators were given new liability guidelines for power companies. Starting in 2019, utilities are allowed to shift some fire-related costs to customers if regulators do not find negligence on the company’s part.

