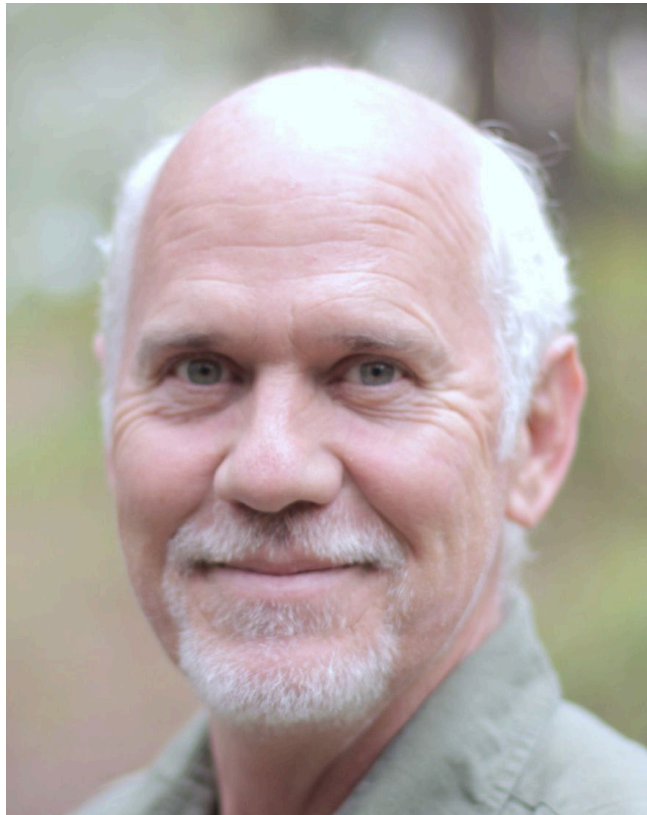

In My View: When Disasters Strike

September 10, 2023



I was in Visalia at the Executive Board meeting of the California Democratic Party when the power was shut off in Del Norte County. I stayed up late Saturday night to finish my Labor Day column in a place where I had power and internet before heading back on Sunday.

The Executive Board meeting ended early due to the impending impacts of Hurricane Hillary which was coming up from the south. I found myself wedged in between two natural disasters and headed north to escape the floods and return to the fires at home.

California Hurricanes

It is highly unusual for a tropical storm to reach as far north as Los Angeles. The last time this happened was more than eighty years ago, before we started feeling the weather effects of climate change. So, it is possible that this is just a rare, unrelated natural phenomenon.

However, if we consider how hurricanes are formed, it is more likely that this freak storm was related to the overheating of our planet. Hurricanes develop when ocean temperatures are at least 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

It is uncommon for the temperature to be this warm this far north.

Even after downgrading to Tropical Storm Hillary, the intense rain resulted in flash floods in southern California.

Some areas received over ten inches of rain in a 48-hour period. These areas were unable to absorb the extra rain and it flowed from the mountains creating flooding in the low-lying areas.

Fire Impacts

As I drove home, I hoped that some of this rain would blow north and help quench the wildfires in our backyard. But nature was not so accommodating. When I returned to my house, the power was out. Since we have a private well, this meant that we also had no water.

In my absence, for three days my family adapted to these circumstances as did many other people in the county. The people that are hooked up to city water at least had water flowing into their homes. For us it meant importing water for drinking and other necessities after our stored water ran out.

On Monday, I was hauling water up to our house from a creek that is on our property, and it felt like a third world situation. This served as a reminder to appreciate all the amenities that we take for granted. We had no power, internet, or water, but did have a roof. We were more fortunate than residents that had to evacuate.

Oregon Power

One of the ways in which my family adapted to the closure of most businesses in our county was to cross the border to Oregon. On the other side of an invisible line there was gas, power, phone, and internet. This is the result of a quirk in our electrical grid.

You may recall that I highlighted this issue in a prior column (6/14/23), “Where does our power come from?” In this column I described how we are on a power peninsula. There is only a single transmission line that provides power to Del Norte County.

“The Del Norte County power grid is not connected to Humboldt County, and I learned recently that our grid does not connect to Brookings either. This leaves us on a power peninsula jutting down from Oregon... This single connection to electricity leaves us vulnerable to power interruptions.”

Redundancy Needed

Our county was ahead of the curve when the Tri-Agency Economic Development Authority developed redundancy in our internet connectivity. This means that we are connected from more than one direction. This is what we need with our electrical power service.

The logical choice is to reconnect the grid at the border near Brookings. These two power grids used to be connected. In 1961, Pacific Power and Light purchased the California Oregon Power Company which had service areas into southern Oregon and Northern California. Sometime after this acquisition the connection to Curry County was severed.

Today, north of the border, electricity is provided by the Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative, a member-owned, not-for-profit electric cooperative serving over 13,000 members and businesses in Coos and Curry Counties. They buy 100% of their power (83% from hydroelectric) from the Bonneville Power Administration.

We Can Work It Out

Most of the economic impact of the wildfires on our community resulted from the power outage, not the fires. Homes and stores lost food with no refrigeration. Businesses could not open, and people could not work.

Wildfires are hard to predict and difficult to control once they start. We can't prevent all wildfires.

However, there are steps we can take to mitigate the risk of future blackouts by addressing our vulnerability to the impacts of power outages. It will no doubt be challenging to accomplish this, but our elected leaders should be pushing hard to reconnect our grid to the north. We need power redundancy.

This seems like the type of large-scale regional project that would be perfect for Tri-Agency to work on. There is nothing more important to economic development than a reliable source of power. The City, County, Harbor, School District, Tribes and others should make this a priority.

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