

# Over two million to be without power over weekend as wildfires sweep through California

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High winds and unfavorable weather conditions caused a string of wildfires to continue burning throughout the state of California Friday into Saturday. This led the massive Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) to announce that for the third time this month it would be deliberately shutting off power to customers across Northern California.

On top of the 180,000 PG&E customers who lost electricity this week, the utility announced that 850,000 Northern California customers would lose power due to heightened wind risk. This latest outage will affect more than 2 million people in total and once again, the wealthiest state in the wealthiest country has proven incapable of coping with a regularly occurring and predictable weather event.

With significant fires raging across the state, Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency across the state.

In the wine-growing region of Sonoma County north of the San Francisco Bay area, the Kincade Fire has incinerated more than 22,000 acres and was only 5 percent contained as of Friday evening. The entire town of Geyserville was forced to evacuate as winds topped 70 miles per hour. So far 49 structures have been confirmed destroyed and that number is expected to rise significantly over the weekend.

While the cause of the fire is still under investigation, PG&E filed a mandatory report with the California Public Utilities Commission stating that one of its workers noticed that the State Department of Forestry and Fire Protection had cordoned off an area enclosing a problematic transmission line. The department, Cal Fire, had also located a “broken jumper on the same [transmission line] tower.” Even though lower voltage lines distributing power to homes and businesses in the

area had been shut off, the transmission line was still electrified at the time the fire started.

With the full support and consent of the state Democratic Party, the utility announced this year that it would institute the practice of widespread preemptive power shutoffs during weather conditions deemed hazardous to mitigate fire danger rather than spend the billions needed to modernize its grid thus jeopardizing or delaying its bondholder payments. However, even this has apparently not stopped fires from being sparked by the utility’s power lines.

PG&E was ultimately found at fault for starting last year’s Camp Fire, whose first anniversary is less than two weeks away. That fire caused at least 85 civilian fatalities, destroyed 18,804 structures and completely obliterated the town of Paradise, California, population 26,218. The Camp Fire became the most destructive in California state history and the most destructive in the US in nearly a century.

As a consequence, PG&E, the largest power utility in the US by number of customers, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on January 14 in order to avoid the possibility of over \$30 billion liabilities. Nonetheless, PG&E executives continued to be awarded millions in severance and bonuses after the filing and plans were made at least as of April to pay back outstanding private creditors who are were owed approximately \$17.5 billion.

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom delivered a news conference Friday denouncing PG&E for its latest series of power outages. “They simply did not do their jobs,” he said. “It took us decades to get here, but we will get out of this mess. We will do everything in our power to restructure PG&E so they are a completely different entity when they emerge out of bankruptcy. Mark my words. It is a new day of accountability.”

PG&E had cut off power to more than 2 million residents only last week in a manner which showed almost complete disregard for all the residents affected. The company's website frequently crashed during the outage while most customers received little or no warning that the outages would take place.

Newsom's latest condemnation of the utility rings completely hypocritical, however, as the recipient of more than \$200,000 in contributions from the company to his 2018 gubernatorial campaign fund. Moreover, Newsom has already sponsored legislation removing legal liability standards for electrical utilities and last July signed into law Assembly Bill 1054 or AB 20154, which creates a \$26 billion wildfire liability fund meant to diminish the financial impact of the utilities' negligence. Investor-owned utilities are only required to contribute \$5 billion over 5 years into the fund while additional funding for the bill is expected to come through heightened utility bill rates.

Even as Californians in the north dealt with more forced power outages, wildfires and power outages raged through the Southern California region this week.

The Tick Fire in Santa Clarita north of Los Angeles has so far consumed 4,300 acres and is only 5 percent contained according to fire officials. At least six homes have been destroyed by the inferno so far with many more damaged. High winds, single digit humidity and high temperatures are also expected to spread the fire over the weekend, possibly threatening more populated areas of the region.

Interviews conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that many affected residents received no warning of the fires and were prompted to evacuate by the smell of smoke and sound of helicopters flying overhead.

Southern California Edison, the state's second largest utility, also shut down electrical power to the region affecting tens of thousands of customers. According to the *Times* reporting, Sheriff's deputies tasked with giving door to door notices to evacuate ignored entire streets thinking that darkened households meant that residents had already left on their own.

In addition to the Kincade and Tick fires, there are currently 15 major fires burning throughout California centered around the San Francisco Bay, Los Angeles and San Diego areas.

Years of underfunding of fire prevention activities along with man-made climate change have rapidly increased the prevalence of wildfires in California and along the west coast of the United States. Among the list of the top ten

most destructive California wildfires in terms of acres burned, all but one of them started in the last two decades. Of these, half started within the past ten years.

What the wildfires reveal above all else is that capitalism has no solution to the continuing proliferation of such disasters, and in fact is instrumental in facilitating their creation and has no adequate means of protecting vulnerable populations for their effects.

Leading corporate media outlets have already transitioned from initial feigned expressions of outrage to now advocating for acceptance of a "new normal" of raging wildfires and mass power shutoffs. In covering the California wildfires this week, the *New York Times* quoted professor John Abaztoglou at the University of Idaho who said, "I think the perception is that we're supposed to control them. But in a lot of cases we cannot. And that may allow us to think a little bit differently about how we live with fire. We call it wildfire for a reason—it's not domesticated fire."

The fact of the matter is that there is enough money available to prevent most wildfires and quickly extinguish those that do arise. The current estimated cost of burying PG&E's transmission lines is \$67 billion. Even though this number is doubtless highly inflated, it is still less than half the combined wealth of the state's two richest individuals, Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

There will be no solution to the California wildfire crisis and utility shutoffs outside of the working class taking control of the large utilities and running them on the basis of human need rather than private profit. Only on that basis can the power monopolies' outdated equipment be updated to modern, safe standards such that wildfires can be prevented or quickly eradicated with the uninterrupted provision of critically needed electrical power to all the state's 40 million residents.



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