

# PG&E mulls massive power cut to Northern and Central California amid midweek fire weather



**SLIDE 1 OF 3**

A Pacific Gas and Electric strike team stages on Mark West Springs Road in the Tubbs fire zone, Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2019 as they wait to do inspections of area power lines after the winds this week, (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)



**GUY KOVNER AND WILL SCHMITT**

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PG&E's largest planned power outage could coincide with the two-year anniversary of the North Bay wildfires as a weather forecast reminiscent of the October 2017 firestorm prompted utility officials to consider shutting off electricity Wednesday and Thursday in about 30 counties across Northern and Central California.

The unprecedented advisory, affecting millions of residents, includes the North Bay and appears to exempt only two counties in PG&E's service territory, Marin and San Francisco.

Sonoma County officials said the preemptive outage — now one of California's major fire-prevention strategies — could include nearly four out of 10 residents and might last several days.

PG&E said Monday night that more than 600,000 customers could be affected by the shut-off across Northern and Central California, including 66,289 customers in Sonoma County. About 26,430 customers could be affected in Lake County, 32,124 in Napa County and 6,000 in Mendocino County.

The county's Emergency Operations Center opened Monday as officials scrambled to prepare for a potentially massive outage, which Supervisor James Gore referred to as a "secondary disaster."

"If we're caught flatfooted people's lives are at risk," he said. "It feels more like living in tornado alley not just Sonoma County these days."

Cal Fire Battalion Chief Marshall Turbeville said the prospect of winds over Mount St. Helena at 60 mph or more Wednesday night was reminiscent of the conditions two years ago that drove the Tubbs fire from Calistoga to Santa Rosa in four hours.



Firefighters can't stop the edge of a windblown wildfire that throws embers ahead as it grows hotter and moves faster, he said.

Winds typically peak at night, when people are sleeping, and a power outage would turn off street lights, traffic signals and some cellphone service — “a whole new dynamic,” Turbeville said.

Cal Fire is staffing additional fire engines in Sonoma, Lake, Napa, Colusa, Solano and Yolo counties which are all on PG&E’s list of potential power shut-offs. The agency is also mobilizing a heavy duty helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft at the Sonoma County airport, but no air drops can be made at night, Turbeville said.

For North Bay fire survivors, the timing of extraordinary fire warning carried particular significance, coming on the eve of the two-year anniversary marking the region’s worst disaster on record.

Gena Jacob, a Larkfield resident who lost her home in the Tubbs fire, said she can’t escape the horror of her experience two years ago.



“Even sunsets,” she said. “I’ll think of what I saw when I left my house — that orange glow. It automatically takes you back to that place.”

Jacob and her wife, Sheri, moved into their rebuilt home in August and are better prepared but still wary, especially after a small fire recently in the Mark West area prompted an all-out air and ground attack.

“We won’t take any chances this time around,” Jacob said.

Weather forecasting and operations teams in PG&E’s Emergency Operations Center in San Francisco were monitoring the ominous conditions — strong winds, low humidity and dry vegetation — expected Wednesday morning through Thursday afternoon, PG&E spokeswoman Deanna Contreras said in a statement.

Gore, the Sonoma County supervisor, said PG&E advised county officials that 32,000 to 66,000 customers in the county could be impacted by the shut-off, which Gore said amounts to 120,000 to 190,000 people, or nearly 40% of the county’s population.

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PG&E said Monday night that more than 20 communities in Sonoma County could be affected by the outage, including Santa Rosa, Sonoma, Petaluma, Healdsburg, Cloverdale, Glen Ellen, Penngrove, Geyserville, Kenwood, Rohnert Park, Windsor, Annapolis, Stewarts Point, Cotati, Cazadero, Guerneville, Larkfield, El Verano, Boyes Hot Springs, Fulton and Bodega Bay.



PG&E notified the Santa Rosa City Schools District on Monday afternoon that Maria Carrillo High, Rincon Valley Middle, Santa Rosa Middle, Hidden Valley Elementary, Proctor Terrace Elementary, Santa Rosa Accelerated Charter School and Lewis Education Center should all be on alert for a possible shut-off Wednesday through Friday. If power is shut off at the schools during the day Wednesday, classes will continue as usual, district officials said. But if the power is shut off before school begins, then the affected schools will be closed, they said. All after-school programs, such as athletics and childcare, would be canceled in the event of an outage.

The utility's notice coincided with a fire weather watch issued by the National Weather Service that includes the North Bay's hills and valleys from Tuesday evening through Thursday. The winds in the hills are expected to be the strongest of

the fire season, according to the weather service, and when combined with warm and dry conditions, could lead to “the strongest event since October 8th and 9th of 2017,” according to PG&E.

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The bankrupt utility has sought to limit its liability and the risk of additional calamities by ordering preemptive shutdowns during weather events that can fuel large wildfires.

A PG&E online map created Monday noted that circuits serving much of eastern and northern Santa Rosa, as well as circuits stretching from Petaluma to Cloverdale, are more likely to be impacted in the event of a shut-off this week. The map is available online at [bit.ly/PGE100719](http://bit.ly/PGE100719).

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PG&E's maps will be updated as utility officials monitor the weather and define the scope of the outage, leading to a better count of the customers affected, Contreras said.

Outages could start as early as midnight Wednesday, said Melissa Valle, a spokeswoman for the Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management. The utility has told local government officials it would try to start restoring power Thursday afternoon and that it could take up to five days to restore power to all customers, she said.

"Because it is a broader area, it might take them longer than last time," Valle said. "We're waiting for them to narrow it down and see which jurisdictions are going to be impacted."

Gore said even the potential disruption "means all hands on deck," noting with some irony that so much must be done while "no wind is blowing and nothing is burning."

A shutdown in late September, followed by a delay in decision-making by utility officials, affected about 1,400 PG&E customers in Sonoma and Napa counties. The outage was ordered despite an absence of the high winds PG&E says it looks for when mulling planned power cuts.

Gore said he has no qualms about power shut-offs as a fire prevention measure, but has concerns about PG&E's interaction with the county and the public. "It's about execution, it's about clear communication," he said.

Last month, after PG&E dramatically scaled back a North Bay shut-off, Gore said he was frustrated by the time and money expended. "I've never seen so much money used in our county to chase a weather forecast," he said at the time.

PG&E has taken into account at least one suggestion from the county: adding a 7:30 a.m. call to provide updates, in

addition to previously planned conferences at 12:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., Valle said.

PG&E this year expanded its plan for public safety power shut-offs this year to include large transmission lines that carry electricity across California, on top of the smaller distribution lines that connect homes and businesses to the power grid.

The utility repeated its advisory that customers in high fire-threat areas are most likely to be included in a shut-off, but any of its more than 5 million customers could be affected. The number of people is much higher.

The weather service warned of “critical fire weather conditions,” with sustained winds of 10 to 20 mph and gusts up to 30 mph in North Bay valleys. In the mountains, sustained winds will be 20 to 30 mph, with gusts up to 55 mph.

On Mount St. Helena, winds are expected to exceed 60 mph Wednesday night into Thursday, meteorologist Scott Rowe said.

The conditions are not as extreme as 2017, but with a dry landscape “just a spark” can start a windblown wildfire, he said.

The time period of greatest concern is late Wednesday through early Thursday, the weather service said.

A fire weather watch typically precedes a red flag fire warning, which Rowe said Monday could come within 24 hours.

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