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“Deflect, Delay, Defer”: Decade of Pacific Gas & Electric Wildfire Safety Pushback Preceded Disasters

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After sparking a series of deadly fires in Northern California and then shutting off power to millions of people in an attempt to avoid sparking more, Pacific Gas & Electric has started on an ambitious slate of upgrades that it says will drastically reduce the number of new fires sparked by its electrical equipment.

The utility giant’s leaders have said that transformation may

take as long as a decade. But a detailed review of documents and hearings shows that PG&E spent the last 10 years resisting many of those very same reforms.

A FRONTLINE investigation found dozens of instances of such pushback: For instance, the company fought a proposal that it report every fire its equipment caused, describing the measure as an “unnecessary cost” of time and resources in a 2010 filing. The following year, responding to another proposal, its attorneys wrote that “PG&E does not agree that it is necessary to require a formal plan specific to fire prevention.” And for years, the Northern California company argued to regulators that it shouldn’t be held to the same standards as its Southern California counterparts, saying wind-driven fire risk in its territory was significantly lower than in Southern California.

These battles unfolded mainly within a little-publicized proceeding overseen by its regulator, the California Public Utilities Commission. In recent years, the commission has monitored the utilities’ fire safety more aggressively. But from 2008 to 2018, even as it wrote rules aimed at reducing utility wildfires, the commission didn’t have a single staff member who specialized in wildfire prevention. During that period, according to three former employees, the commission was hamstrung by too few enforcement officers and distracted by simultaneous investigations into other utility catastrophes, which allowed utility lawyers to dominate its proceedings.

In many cases, PG&E could have upgraded its systems and

passed along those costs to its consumers as rate increases. After starting a devastating fire in 2018, the company filed for bankruptcy. Its exit plan, approved in June, leaves the company as much as $38 billion in debt, including $13.5 billion in compensation owed to people who lost their homes and businesses in fires over the last several years.

PG&E wasn’t the only utility that pushed back against fire-prevention regulations. California’s two other major investor-owned utilities, Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric, usually sided with them. But documents and interviews suggest that the vigor and persistence of PG&E’s resistance stood out.

“On a scale from one to 10, where 10 is really obstructive and zero is completely cooperative, I would have put PG&E at a nine,” said Mark Ferron, a CPUC commissioner from 2011 to 2014.

“The culture of PG&E has been to push back,” said Timothy Alan Simon, the former CPUC commissioner assigned to oversee the first years of the proceeding. “I think that kind of attitude has backfired.”

The uncooperative power company, together with an overwhelmed regulator, a rapidly warming climate, and a growing population living in California’s tinder-dry forests, combined to set the stage for tragedy: PG&E equipment has been found responsible for numerous wildfires in recent years, including the 2018 Camp Fire that burned nearly 14,000 homes and killed scores of people in the town of Paradise and

nearby communities. In June, PG&E pleaded guilty to 84 counts of involuntary manslaughter in connection with the blaze.

The 2018 Camp Fire burned 11,000 homes and killed 85 people around the town of Paradise.

FRONTLINE’s review of hundreds of documents filed with CPUC between 2008 and 2019 reveals that PG&E and its regulators repeatedly failed to swiftly adopt stringent safety measures. The story those records tell has been corroborated by interviews with more than a dozen experts and officials, some now retired, who attended years of hearings and workshops. PG&E’s recent embrace of fire safety policies, they say, has taken place only after years of resistance — a pattern that caused them deep exasperation.

“Deflect, delay, defer … we would joke that these were the rules of utility rulemaking,” said Los Angeles County Deputy Fire Chief John Todd, one of the few firefighting professionals

who attended the CPUC hearings. “There was just no movement. It felt that they were just going to run out the clock on you.”

Many fire prevention measures were first proposed by a small, determined cadre of safety advocates long before they were forced upon the utilities by the CPUC or frustrated state lawmakers.

“We called it the glacial rodeo,” said Joseph Mitchell, a San Diego County resident who devoted years advocating for greater fire safety. “PG&E was just very, very hesitant. … I think it’s come back to bite them now.”

“There was just no movement. It felt that they were just going to run out the clock on you.”

- John Todd, Los Angeles County deputy fire chief

Responding to a list of questions regarding the pushback on fire safety measures described in this story, PG&E spokesperson Jennifer Robison said in an email that “PG&E is very much focused on the future and re-imagining the company as one driven by the twin goals of safety and better serving our customers.” The devastating 2017 and 2018 fires “have made it clear that we must work together to continue to do what we must to keep our customers, their families and communities safe,” she said.

Robison points to the “state-of-the-art technology and techniques” the company has implemented in the last three years, including new fire-spread modeling, hundreds of new

weather stations and cameras that allow for more granular weather forecasting and fire monitoring, and line inspections that sometimes include drones and helicopters. She says PG&E has begun replacing conventional power lines in wildfire-prone areas with insulated “tree wire” that’s less likely to spark a blaze if it comes into contact with vegetation. And she says the company has begun the process of dividing up its distribution system so that fire safety power shutoffs affect fewer people. These and other measures “lessen the risk that our equipment will start a wildfire.”

She referred to a summary on PG&E’s website detailing the many strides the company has made toward fire safety over the last three years.

PG&E CEO Bill Johnson addressed the utility’s widespread power shutoffs at an emergency meeting of the California Public Utilities Commission on Oct. 18, 2019. (Stephanie Lister/KQED)

“We remain deeply, deeply sorry for the terrible devastation we have caused,” said former company CEO William Johnson in a June 18 public statement accompanying the company’s guilty plea for the Camp Fire deaths. “We are intently focused on reducing the risk of wildfire in our communities.”

Asked to respond to charges that the CPUC’s approach to wildfire safety wasn’t aggressive enough in the years leading to the disasters of 2017 and 2018, commission spokesperson Terrie Prosper said in an email that the agency has been “working hard to address wildfire issues, both by ramping up staffing and by creating new policies and working with sister agencies. … Since the massive wildfires began a few years ago, the CPUC has taken a number of steps to ensure rules were in place for utilities, who have an obligation to safely operate their systems.”

After more than 100 deaths in PG&E-caused fires since 2015, critics of the utility and its regulator say such changes have come too late.

“It was so frustrating to have worked so hard on this for so long, and to have this horrendous failure.”

Joseph Mitchell, physicist and San Diego resident

Former CPUC commissioner Catherine Sandoval says PG&E knew it had a wildfire problem fueled by drought and bark-beetle tree die-offs long before taking its recent steps.

“They knew that their territory was very vulnerable to wildfire,” she said. “Any assertion that they were just getting started on

it in 2019 is disingenuous.”

In November 2018, Mitchell was devastated as he listened to news reports of the Camp Fire.

“I had tears streaming down my face,” he said. “I mean, it was so frustrating to have worked so hard on this for so long, and to have this horrendous failure.”

‘Trench warfare’

Mitchell, a physicist who worked in Europe before moving to California, bought his white, two-story San Diego County bungalow in 1999. Surrounded by crooked cacti and leggy rose bushes, the home sits atop a scrub-lined road northeast of San Diego in an area historically prone to devastating wildfires. In dry years — meaning most years — any wayward spark can ignite an inferno.

Haunted by the prospect that a wildfire could reduce his life to rubble, Mitchell rigged a rooftop watering system to protect his home in 2003. Soon after, a fire destroyed hundreds of nearby homes. Thanks to his system, when Mitchell and his wife Diane Conklin returned to theirs, roses still bloomed around their unscathed home.

When San Diego Gas & Electric proposed a new power line through the neighborhood, Mitchell began investigating its potential fire risk and found a stunning relationship: Electrical equipment starts 10 percent or fewer of California’s fires, but has caused 40 percent of the state’s worst blazes. That’s

because the high winds that can snap power poles and bring down lines can transform a spark into a catastrophe. When SDG&E equipment ignited the Witch Fire in 2007, Mitchell’s home again survived — but 1,100 others did not. He and Conklin decided they had to do more to protect their community.

Before he became involved in state-level hearings on wildfire safety, San Diego-area physicist Joseph Mitchell designed this rooftop watering system to protect his own home from fire. (Courtesy of Joseph Mitchell)

So did the CPUC: In late 2008, the regulator opened a proceeding aimed at preventing future utility-caused fires. Thus began a years-long process in which stakeholders — including utility companies, state and city agencies, telecommunications firms, safety advocates and CPUC officials — could propose and debate new rules the utilities would have to follow.

Mitchell and Conklin, a law school graduate, threw themselves into the process as advocates under the name Mussey Grade Road Alliance, after their San Diego County community. Mitchell consulted wildfire experts and immersed himself in research papers while Conklin handled the legal paperwork. To encourage public involvement in proceedings, the CPUC pays participants for their time and labor; since 2006, Mitchell estimates that the couple has received close to $700,000 from the CPUC for their work on wildfires.

As the proceeding unfolded, it calcified into a series of standoffs between opposing camps. On one side: Mitchell, Conklin, a handful of municipal fire and elected officials, and the CPUC Consumer Protection and Safety Division — the department tasked with advocating for safety. On the other: attorneys representing the utilities.

Southern California Edison, with territory far larger than San Diego Gas & Electric’s but not as sprawling or complex as PG&E’s, was dogged by the danger of the region’s famous Santa Ana winds. Despite this specter of higher fire risk, their attorneys nearly always sided with PG&E during the hearings.

SDG&E, which has the smallest and simplest system of the three major utilities, was the most likely to agree to proposed fire safety rules, as it had already invested in reforms after its equipment had touched off major fires in 2003 and 2007.

“They wanted to make some real changes,” said Los Angeles County Fire’s John Todd.

Todd had trained as a forester before being hired by the

county’s fire agency and believed safety should trump financial considerations. He expected to be involved in the CPUC proceeding for a few months at the most.

“Eventually I learned that this was going to be a long game,” Todd said. He attended meetings for years, growing incredulous at how long it took to get new rules written. “It was trench warfare. … We weren’t moving, we were just locked into place.”

The workload was unsustainable, Todd says, and he eventually stepped back to focus on pressing safety issues in his own community. That left the process even more vulnerable to domination by the utilities, he said, because once everyone else returned to their day jobs, “who’s over there still working on the rule book?”

Another official at many hearings was now-retired Laguna Beach Fire Chief Jeff LaTendresse. He recalls that utility lawyers would frequently call for a vote over a motion, transforming a regulatory process into a democratic one. “It was all run by the utilities,” he said.

He often found himself the only fire official present during a given hearing, but was convinced that if other local fire officials had known about the proceeding, they would have been there. The Laguna Beach team became so frustrated with the lack of community involvement that they reached out to their state senator, John Moorlach. In 2016, Moorlach introduced a bill that would have required the CPUC and Cal Fire, the state firefighting agency, to consult with local officials and fire

departments in identifying areas where overhead power lines posed an increased wildfire risk. Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed the bill, saying the agencies were already addressing the issue.

Simon, the CPUC commissioner, admits the regulator has not always been rigorous about encouraging public involvement, a “blind spot” that can tilt the balance of power.

“The utilities have a very deep bench, which oftentimes can outmatch local governments or other intervenors,” he said.

In many cases, the commission eventually did rule in favor of safety policies — but only after years of contentious hearings. Several people, including three former CPUC employees, told FRONTLINE that the regulator’s biggest problem was an absence of in-house expertise.

“We had a very skeleton internal staff that didn’t really have any kind of wildfire expertise,” said Mike Florio, a former commissioner who oversaw the proceeding between 2011 and 2017. “I guess it’s human nature, you don’t get a focus on something until it becomes a problem.”

The commission has since addressed its understaffing, said CPUC spokesperson Prosper: In 2018, the agency hired its first three engineers dedicated to wildfires. At the direction of the Legislature, the CPUC has established a new Wildfire Safety Division, which will audit and evaluate utilities’ safety plans. Another new division will provide advisory support to CPUC on safety policies.

‘A waste of Commission staff and utility time’

Almost as soon as the 2008 wildfire safety proceeding began, its slow pace worried CPUC’s safety division. In a March 2009 filing, commission engineer Ray Fugere wrote that “certain entities… would have the commission act like Nero fiddling while Rome burned. … Fires ignited by electric power lines have been responsible for some of the largest wildland fires in California’s history.”

A PG&E worker prepares to cut damaged power lines near Paradise, Calif. on Nov. 13, 2018, five days after a PG&E transmission line sparked the Camp Fire. (Anne Wernikoff/KQED)

To understand how the utilities influenced the pace and outcome of the proceeding, FRONTLINE’s investigation focused on three proposed rules: One would require utilities to report each fire that their equipment started. A second would create detailed maps to identify fire-prone parts of the system. A third would require utilities to create contingency plans for

extreme winds.

Mitchell’s group made the first proposal – that utilities track and report every fire – as soon as the proceeding began. As it stood, utilities only reported fires that burned more than 100 acres. But Mitchell believed that gathering data on all fires — even small ones — would help utilities identify problem areas and prevent larger blazes.

PG&E immediately opposed the idea, saying that earlier efforts to collect such data had proven “a waste of commission staff and utility time” and that being required to disclose its role in fires could create new legal liabilities. Mitchell “would like to have the electric utilities collect fire incident data on the theory that it *might* be helpful for study in the future,” wrote PG&E’s attorneys in January 2010. PG&E put forth an alternate proposal, which would require utilities and the CPUC’s safety division to jointly assess “adequacy of fire-related data.”

Initially, the CPUC rejected both Mitchell’s and PG&E’s proposals. “We are not convinced that the … proposal to require [utilities] to report detailed data on all power-line fires will be any more successful than our previous effort,” it wrote in a 2012 decision. But the commission promised to reconsider the issue in a future phase of the proceeding.

Mitchell’s group continued to advocate for fire reporting, while PG&E and Southern California Edison persisted in their opposition, now arguing the idea was impractical because it would largely rely on “field observations made by utility personnel who are not trained forensic fire investigators.”

Finally, in 2013, PG&E and Edison agreed to the mandate after negotiating changes that would limit their liability. But even after that, PG&E and Edison pushed for the rule to apply exclusively to “extreme” or “very high” fire threat areas.

It wasn’t until 2014 — the proceeding’s sixth year — that the commission finally mandated utilities track and report all fires, noting that PG&E and Edison remained “lukewarm” about the plan while SDG&E “strongly” supported it.

PG&E’s Robison did not comment on the company’s opposition to reporting its system’s fires, but she said that data now provides “an invaluable tool” for PG&E and regulators, allowing them to “evaluate diverse risks, better understand the effects of extreme weather, and, most importantly, improve wildfire safety.” She noted that the reported data has shown that the majority of fires associated with its system were “relatively small in size” and occurred outside high-risk areas. Further, she said, the data has shown that the number of fires within its highest risk territories has decreased by nearly 30 percent over the last two years, she said.

‘A fire prevention plan is not necessary’

A second key proposal made early in the rulemaking would require utilities to create contingency plans for the extreme winds that can cause fast-moving, destructive wildfires. The utilities could then assess what equipment might be vulnerable under worst-case wind conditions and either reinforce it or take other safety steps, like power shutoffs.

Again, PG&E pushed back, describing the idea as “misplaced” for several reasons: It fell under an inappropriate legal framework; duplicated plans already in existence; and assumed that “somehow utilities (or anyone else) can predict wildfires started by” power lines. Edison endorsed PG&E’s position, adding that the company “does not believe such costs are outweighed by the uncertain benefits of this proposal.”

PG&E also argued that if adopted, the mandate should only apply to Southern California utilities: “High winds in Northern California are most frequently associated with winter storms (not summer fire risk) and may not play as great a role in potential fire risk in Northern California as they do in Southern California,” the company’s lawyers wrote in 2011.

It was an argument PG&E made for years: That it should be held to different fire safety standards than its Southern Californian counterparts. Yet according to fire officials interviewed for this story, the historical record shows that wind-driven wildfire has always been a part of Northern California’s landscape.

“A fire prevention plan is not necessary.”

PGE, in a 2012 CPUC hearing document

In its 2012 decision, the CPUC required the two Southern California utilities to create fire prevention plans while asking PG&E to make a “good faith” effort to determine if its territory needed one too. Months later, PG&E told the commission that it had done its due diligence and “determined a fire prevention

plan is not necessary” for its Northern California facilities. However, it nonetheless included a six-page summary of its territory-wide fire prevention and mitigation plans. The CPUC in 2013 approved the filing despite protests from Mitchell’s group that it was grossly inadequate.

It took a disaster of historic proportions and a sweeping change in state law to force PG&E to finally create a rigorous, enforceable fire protection plan. Power line-sparked fires swept through parts of Northern California in October 2017, destroying nearly 10,000 structures and killing 44 people. State Sen. Bill Dodd, who represents a wine country district that saw some of the worst of the destruction, was so incensed that PG&E lacked a legally binding wildfire safety plan that he wrote a law requiring the state’s utilities to develop plans or face criminal charges.

In February 2019, PG&E submitted the first of its newly required annual wildfire mitigation plans. In that 145-page blueprint, the company envisioned spending at least $1.7 billion for a program including improved infrastructure, a dramatically expanded effort to find and trim or remove dangerous trees near power lines, and expanding its network of remote weather stations to provide better awareness during periods of high fire danger. The plan also relied heavily on public safety power shutoffs to minimize the risk of wildfires during extremely windy, dry weather.

A CPUC administrative law judge signed off on the plan, though she identified several aspects of PG&E’s plan that

required improvement in the following years’ plans. Responding, PG&E wrote, “we will not solve the problems of catastrophic wildfires in one year.”

Asked about the utility’s initial resistance to creating a fire contingency plan, PG&E’s Robison referred to a section of the 2012 decision in which the CPUC echoed the PG&E’s longstanding argument that Southern California “is the area of the state with the greatest risk” of utility-caused fires. Edison’s spokesman David Song said his company had never been “opposed to performing risk analysis on equipment based on high winds in high fire areas,” but rather contested the legal framework of the proposal and believed it conflicted with other requirements.

PG&E got mixed reviews for its execution of the first year’s plan. Unlike 2017 and 2018, no one died in fires sparked by the company’s equipment. But its widespread power shutoffs, which reached a climax during prolonged windstorms in October 2019 when more than 1 million customers were blacked out, were initially plagued by poor communication with the public. Although the utility reported it found hundreds of locations where the shutoffs probably prevented fires, one of its high-voltage transmission lines touched off one of the year’s most destructive blazes — the Kincade Fire, which broke out as 80 m.p.h. gusts raked a mountainous area north of San Francisco. About 200,000 people were forced from their homes during the incident, which destroyed 374 structures.

A battle over maps

A third proposal advocated by Mitchell’s group and the CPUC’s safety division championed the creation of elaborate statewide fire maps overseen by the commission. Fire scientists have long known that a granular map of winds and other weather factors, layered on maps of vegetation, topography, human settlement and power lines, can provide invaluable insight into where fires may start and spread. Such maps could help utilities focus maintenance work on the areas at highest risk.

San Diego Gas & Electric had already mapped its system. PG&E and Southern California Edison were open to the idea, but pushed back on a series of specifics. PG&E attorneys asked that the CPUC not enforce the maps in an “absolute or prescriptive” way. “It should be made clear in the standard or rule that the maps are simply a guideline, and not the ultimate authority,” PG&E attorneys wrote in 2009.

The CPUC adopted interim fire maps for Southern California that year, but when Mitchell’s group and the commission’s safety division pushed for statewide maps with detailed wind data, Edison said the proposal would “impose significant costs on the utilities” and would duplicate work already done.

“Do not adopt,” PG&E attorneys wrote. “[The proposal] should be rejected outright. It overreaches in many respects, including the fact that it proposes that the maps be funded by the [utilities].” The company began suggesting the commission

postpone the map question until a later phase of the proceeding, a suggestion the CPUC agreed to over the objections of safety advocates.

“We have been promised a steak, and it has been turned into a hash, and then put into a stew, which has been used to make a soup.”

Joseph Mitchell, in a 2017 CPUC hearing document

By 2015, PG&E and SoCal Edison had stopped resisting the concept but continued to influence the plan in ways that safety advocates believed delayed its implementation and diminished its rigor. That May, the CPUC opened a whole new proceeding to specifically focus on the maps and other issues that hadn’t been resolved.

Even in 2016, after Cal Fire concluded PG&E equipment had sparked a 70,000-acre wind-driven fire in Amador and Calaveras counties the year before, the utility continued to assert the fire threat in its territory was “very different from conditions in Southern California.”

Around then, Mitchell noticed that wind-specific maps — the core of his initial proposal — had been diluted.

“We have been promised a steak, and it has been turned into a hash, and then put into a stew, which has been used to make a soup,” Mitchell wrote. “If the commission is to deliver on what it has promised ratepayers in this proceeding … it will need to pull the steak back out of the soup.”

“[PG&E] knew that their territory was very vulnerable to

wildfire.”

Catherine Sandoval, former CPUC commissioner

In January 2018 — nearly a decade after the mapping proposal was first made — the CPUC adopted new fire maps and required utilities to use remote weather stations to monitor high winds. Mitchell notes that the maps still lack the detailed wind data that would help utilities pinpoint vulnerable infrastructure.

Asked recently about its early opposition to detailed, CPUC-managed maps, Edison’s spokesperson, Song, said the utility’s “concern was procedural in nature, not with the substance of the rulemaking.” In response to a similar inquiry, PG&E’s Robison said the current map is helping PG&E and others prioritize safety, prevention and response efforts. She added that it shows how dramatically climate impacts are increasing fire risk. “In less than a decade, the area served by PG&E that the CPUC designated to be at a high risk of wildfire has tripled from 15 percent to more than 50 percent,” she said.

Stopping sparks

Regulatory hearings weren’t the only arena in which PG&E took a sluggish approach to addressing fire safety. FRONTLINE’s investigation found the utility also failed to adopt a risk-reduction technique that had been used by other utilities for years.

When power lines suffer a problem — for instance, a branch

striking the line — devices called “reclosers” will halt the flow of electricity, then immediately try to restore it. (When lights flicker at a home or an office building, it’s likely due to a recloser doing its job.)

For at least 30 years, utilities have known that reclosers can also start fires. For instance, if a line breaks and falls on brush-covered ground, the recloser’s attempt to resume the flow of power can spark a fire. A 1989 booklet titled “Power Line Fire Prevention Field Guide,” written by utility companies in conjunction with state fire agencies, outlined the risk: “Automatic reclosers, by re-energizing the line… increase the probability of ignition,” the booklet said.

As a result, many utilities have long-standing policies to turn off reclosers during fire season, opting for the laborious but safer method of sending out a crew to manually check a power line when it faults. Southern California Edison told FRONTLINE that it has had a policy in place to block reclosers during fire season since at least 1956; SDG&E began doing the same after its 2007 fire and hasn’t identified a recloser-linked fire since.

“That’s a real basic, easy thing to do,” said Hal Mortier, SDG&E’s retired head of fire safety.

PG&E workers install a Viper Recloser in Yountville, California in April 2020. (David Paul Morris/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Regulators raised the danger of reclosers with PG&E more than once: Former commissioner Simon said the regulator had “extensive dialogue” about reclosers with all utilities after the 2007 Witch Fire in San Diego County. And at a state Senate hearing in 2015, Sen. Jerry Hill of suburban San Francisco again asked utility officials about recloser risks. Representatives from SDG&E and Edison said they had recloser policies in place, while Pat Hogan, a PG&E senior vice president, said his company’s policy was “very similar to my colleagues’.”

In fact, PG&E did not have a formal recloser policy — a reality that came to light two years later when an active recloser re-energized a fallen line north of San Francisco, sparking a fire. It joined with four other nearby fires, part of the October 2017 wildfire siege, which ultimately killed three people and burned 172 structures.

PG&E only implemented a system-wide recloser shutoff policy in June 2018, after Sen. Hill authored a bill mandating they do so. When asked by FRONTLINE why the company had long failed to adopt such a measure, PG&E’s Robison did not

respond directly, but rather outlined the specifics of the June 2018 program they were legally required to implement.

“We are able to disable reclosing on those line reclosers based on a daily decision-making process during periods of high fire danger, as determined by our Wildfire Safety Operations Center,” Robison said.

‘A Right to Expect Better’

After killing scores of people and destroying billions of dollars of property, PG&E has now adopted a drastic new measure: It routinely cuts power to large portions of the state during times of high fire risk.

San Diego Gas & Electric started giving the measure considerable thought more than a decade ago. After the Witch Fire, SDG&E asked the CPUC for a special proceeding to develop a policy on power shutoffs during high winds. It implemented its first power shutoff under that policy in 2013, and then invested in grid upgrades allowing the utility to, for example, cut power to homes on a single ridge rather than to a whole city. The utility has also ramped up communication systems to notify customers as threatening conditions develop.

“No company makes any money when it is forced to terminate power.”

PG&E filing from 2010

PG&E and SoCal Edison declined to participate in the

proceeding that created the first preemptive power shutoff rules. When the subject was raised in 2010, PG&E said it had little interest.

“No company makes any money when it is forced to terminate power,” utility attorneys wrote. “Termination of power at multiple locations is the last thing that a utility wants to do.” As recently as January 2018, just months after disastrous electricity-sparked fires swept Northern California, PG&E’s former senior vice president Pat Hogan said in a state Senate hearing that the company was open to the idea, but did not have plans to implement it.

This changed months later, after CalFire concluded that PG&E equipment had caused 12 of the previous year’s fires. In October 2018, PG&E conducted its first major intentional blackout during a period of high winds and extremely low humidity, turning off power to 60,000 customers in seven counties. But an event several weeks later led to a dramatic shift in how PG&E and state regulators looked at public safety power shutoffs.

On Nov. 8, a badly worn piece of equipment on a PG&E transmission tower failed, providing the spark that ignited the Camp Fire and incinerated Paradise. PG&E’s policy at the time did not include shutting down its high-voltage transmission lines during fire safety blackouts. The utility said doing that would be overly complex, might affect the stability of its power grid and would likely affect millions of people in its service area. The company’s stance changed after the Camp

Fire, with PG&E deciding in 2019 it would include transmission lines in its power shutoff plans. Partly as a consequence, the company repeatedly turned off power last fall to hundreds of thousands of customers at a time.

Oakland’s darkened Montclair neighborhood at dusk during a PG&E power shutoff on Oct. 10, 2019. (Stephanie Lister/KQED)

Amid widespread criticism of the 2019 shutoffs, PG&E CEO Johnson said it will likely take at least a decade for the company to fortify the system enough to make blackouts unnecessary. That comment drew public outcry, and since then, PG&E has laid out a new plan for power shutoffs, promising future shutoffs will be “smarter, smaller and shorter.”

As California faces the perennial threat of a potentially catastrophic fire season — as well as a global pandemic that threatens to hamper firefighting efforts — many involved in the CPUC wildfire rulemaking reflect on the process with regret:

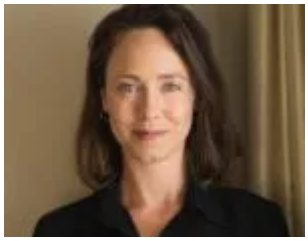
that it took so long; that the commission was hobbled by insufficient expertise; that aggressive safety measures weren’t adopted sooner. It’s impossible to know if those differences could have prevented any given fire, but they cannot help but speculate.

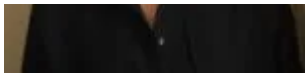
“At the end of the day, I still think that the results are watered down, and it’s for economic reasons,” said retired Laguna Beach Fire Chief Jeff LaTendresse. “But look at what these fires are costing [PG&E]. Not just in losses, but in lawsuits.”

After hundreds of hours spent navigating the unwieldy CPUC proceedings, Joseph Mitchell still considers utility-caused wildfires a solvable problem. This gives him hope, as well as commitment to the cause of utility safety.

“The changes have been very slow,” he said. “People have a right to be upset, they have a right to be concerned, and I think they have a right to expect better.”

— With reporting from Jodi Wei, and additional editing from KQED’s Dan Brekke.





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