

[sierrasun.com](https://www.sierrasun.com)

'Keep our community safe:' Officials warn of power outages ahead of wildfire season

Justin Scacco

6-8 minutes



A Tahoe National Forest hand crew returns to their engines after providing initial structure protection among homes in the Christmas Valley, near South Lake Tahoe, last August. Officials are urging people to be prepared for planned power outages this year.

File photo

As a gust of wind rips over the Sierra Nevada, a tree branch snaps and falls on a power line.

As the limb strikes, bounces off and falls to the ground, a device is triggered to test if the line can be reenergized.

During winter months, this instance causes people to experience a quick blip in power — often resulting in a minor annoyance like resetting clocks and other electronic devices. But as the Truckee-

Tahoe area enters fire season, these blips, created by devices called automatic circuit reclosers, must be shut off, meaning when something strikes a power line, a chain of events will be triggered that can lead to hours and longer without power.

"It's a really great device," said Steven Poncelet, Truckee Donner Public Utility District public information and strategic affairs director. "The problem is that utilities were using them year round and in wildfire season."

The reclosers, which attempt to restore several times after an intermittent fault, can also spark fires during certain conditions, said Poncelet, and next month will be turned off for the remainder of wildfire season, a policy adopted in 2020.

Trending Articles

The following is a list of the most commented articles in the last 7 days.

"It's one of the things that we do to keep our community safe," added Poncelet. "But it means that our reliability is less and that's the trade off for safety, and we'll always put safety first."

The reclosers work well to keep power flowing during winter months, according to Poncelet, but the risk of creating a wildfire as they attempt to reenergize with the potential of some form of fire fuel on the line is too great.

"In the winter when it's storming and you've got lines slapping and you've got snow coming across it, they're awesome," said Poncelet.

PLANNED OUTAGES

Another issue facing the roughly 14,500 customers of the Truckee Donner Public Utility District, which is dependent on transmission of power from NV Energy, is public safety outage management events. The Truckee Donner Public Utility District has roughly 70 employees for all of its services and is a \$30 million a year operating utility. NV Energy began implementing public safety outage management events last year.

When conditions for wildfires are high, planned outages can take place, and according to Poncelet, will mean at least a day without power as crews from both the district and NV Energy visually

inspect roughly 200 miles of lines. No such planned outages occurred last year in the Truckee area, though NV Energy did give warning of a potential outage that was later called off. Poncelet urged customers to be prepared for such an event this year.

"Wildfire season is practically upon us," said Poncelet. "I fully expect us to have at least one (public safety outage management event) this year, if not more, and it's going to be a day, if not multiple days."

The district is encouraging preparedness for the possibility of public safety outage management events, like those experienced in past years by others in the local areas served through PG&E.

"In advance of wildfire season, it's critical that customers who require extra assistance because they are reliant on power for health and safety know there is support available," said Marlene Santos, PG&E executive vice president and chief customer officer, in a news release. "Our partnerships with local community organizations mean we can better ensure the right resources get to those customers who need them most."

In instances of prolonged outages, PG&E this year has removed low income requirements for its Portable Battery Program, which delivered roughly 6,500 batteries to customers last year. Additionally, portable batteries, insulin cooler bags, miniature fridges, and extension cords will be provided to qualifying customers.

Truckee Donner Public Utility District is asking customers to confirm contact information and sign up for automated alerts via text or by emailing <http://www.tdpud.org>

. The district urges backup charging methods for phones and electronic devices, making hard copies of emergency contact and family information, planning for medical needs, and planning for pets.

If NV Energy were to shut off power for a public safety outage management event, the district states that customers should be prepared for several days of outages. Outage events are triggered

by NV Energy's assessment of weather conditions and fire risk. NV Energy will implement its program in June.

Nevada and Placer county officials urge residents to take certain precautions during prolonged outages, such as expecting business and grocery stores to possibly be closed, limiting use of generators, having alternate plans to refrigerate certain medicines, taking inventory of items that are needed and run on electricity, plans for water needs, along with plans for heading to community locations, if needed.

"Make sure you've got a full tank of gas. Make sure you have cash in small denominations, so if you're buying something and people aren't able to take credit cards, that you have close to as exact change as possible," said North Tahoe Fire Protection District Public Information Officer Erin Holland. "That's something we've seen as well where people are rolling around with big bills and no one can make change. Little details like that are really helpful."

On Wednesday, Placer County will host a North Lake Tahoe Senior Resource Fair at North Tahoe Event Center, 8318 N. Lake Blvd., Kings Beach, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Among the items discussed will be emergency preparedness.

"Anybody who is a senior citizen, the same as somebody who is reliant on a medical device, can sign up and they will receive early notification, so they will have extra time to prepare in advance of a power outage," said Holland.

Notifications for Placer County can be signed up for through Placer Alert at <http://www.placer.ca.gov>

or on the Nextdoor app. Truckee Donner Public Utility District makes use of Nixle text alerts To sign up, text TDPUD to 333111.

Justin Scacco is a staff writer with the Sierra Sun. He can be reached at jscacco@sierrasun.com

