

WESTERN WILDFIRES

# California warned to brace for another summer of energy blackouts

"Guarded optimism is a reasonable way to state it," said the president and CEO of the state's power grid operator.



— Electrical lines in South San Francisco, Calif., August 30, 2007. Justin Sullivan / Getty Images file

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**By Alicia Victoria Lozano**

Checking on California's power grid usage and forecast demand became second nature to many residents last year after the state, roiled by soaring temperatures and deadly wildfires, temporarily shut off power for hundreds of thousands of people during the height of summer.

With extreme heat expected this summer, the state's energy regulator warns that more blackouts may be coming despite better statewide preparation.

"Guarded optimism' is a reasonable way to state it," Elliot Mainzer, president and CEO of the California Independent System Operator, or ISO, said Thursday in a discussion hosted by the Sacramento Press Club. "If we get into another big ... heating event like we saw last year, our numbers tell us the grid will be stressed again."

More than 800,000 homes and businesses lost power over two days in August last year during a punishing heat wave that affected California and nearby states. It was the first time in 20 years that the ISO [ordered widespread rolling blackouts](#).

This year, to avoid a repeat scenario, energy regulators have acquired an additional 3,500 megawatts of capacity, including 2,000 megawatts of 4-hour lithium-ion batteries that can store energy generated from renewable sources. One megawatt is enough to power hundreds of homes.

#### PG&E shuts off power in 2019, leaves elderly California residents vulnerable



Even with the backup batteries, California residents should expect to hear from utility companies about how they can better conserve energy during the hottest months, Mainzer said.

"Does that mean we are in the clear? Not necessarily," Mainzer told state lawmakers this month in an oversight hearing. "The most significant risk factor for grid reliability remains extreme heat, particularly heat that spreads across the wider Western United States. And it continues to get hotter every year."

In 2018, California lawmakers set the goal of requiring the state's electricity system to become carbon-free by 2045. A recent [report by the California Energy Commission](#) found that the state would need to triple its grid capacity to meet the deadline.

More than 60 percent of California's electricity is carbon-free, with about 36 percent of that coming from renewable sources, such as wind and solar, the report said.

"Achieving 100 percent clean electricity by 2045 is not only a bold pursuit, but a wise one," Marybel Batjer, president of the California Public Utility Commission, said in a statement. "Such action is required to avoid the worst impacts and costs of climate change and to ensure the delivery of safe, affordable, reliable and clean power to all Californians."

But as the most populous state races toward a sustainable future, officials remain concerned that California's aging infrastructure is not up to the task.

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Robert Foster, former president of Southern California Edison, questioned whether the state's mandate to make all new passenger vehicles zero-emission by 2035 could overburden an already strained power grid.

"We're asking people to go to electric vehicles. We're asking people to electrify their homes, electrify their ports, electrify industry," he said Thursday, adding that he has driven electric cars for more than 20 years. "You plug a modern electric vehicle in your home, it's like adding an additional house in terms of the load on the system."



State Sen. Mike McGuire, a Democrat who presents parts of Northern California, repeatedly blasted Pacific Gas & Electric in Thursday's roundtable over its mishandling of power outages in 2019 and for contributing to multiple massive wildfires in recent years that killed more than 100 people and destroyed thousands of structures.

On Wednesday, the utility company was fined nearly \$150 million for its part in the Kincade Fire, which destroyed more than 100 homes in Sonoma County in 2019; the Zogg Fire, which killed four people in Shasta County in September; and blackouts that affected 50,000 people, [The Associated Press reported](#).

PG&E has also pleaded guilty to 84 counts of involuntary manslaughter after faulty equipment contributed to the destruction of an entire community, Paradise in Butte County, [during the Camp Fire of 2018](#).

"America's largest utility is one of the most dysfunctional utilities, unfortunately, in the nation," McGuire said. "It's incredibly frustrating, because what we're going to see, based on their lack of vegetation management in the most high-risk fire zones ... is the same communities in Northern California hit year after year for the next 10 years."

The state's power dilemma is an unwelcome addition to the growing list of grievances that Gov. Gavin Newsom will have to tackle as a [recall effort continues](#). In 2003, California's energy crisis contributed to the downfall of Gov. Gray Davis, who was ousted in a recall election and replaced by Hollywood superstar Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"This is not Gov. Newsom's problem," Foster said. "He did not create it, [but] he does need to solve it."

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