

SDG&E says its equipment started 167 fires in 5½ years

By J. Harry Jones

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Nearly 170 fires have been started by San Diego Gas & Electric Co. power lines or transformers in the past 5½ years, according to a report the utility released yesterday to bolster its proposal to shut off power to some areas during periods of high fire danger.

Of those fires, 13 occurred during strong winds, and a handful became infernos, such as the Witch Creek, Guejito and Rice Canyon fires of 2007, the report says.

The 40-page report is a response to 21 questions posed by the state Public Utilities Commission, which is examining SDG&E's plan.

First proposed shortly before the height of last year's fire season, the plan was quickly opposed by many people. The utility backed off implementing it immediately, after the PUC asked to review it and several water districts filed lawsuits maintaining that firefighting would suffer without power to run water pumps.

Others who opposed the plan included AT&T, cable operators, wireless phone companies and two divisions within the PUC. They have warned that the costs of shutting off power could exceed the benefits because water, cable, Internet and telephone service would be cut off.

The big question the state must answer: Is it in the region's best interest to shut down power during extreme Santa Anas to avoid starting fires, or would that cause more problems than it solves?

For example, if power were cut off and a fire began from some other source, would lives be in danger because of a lack of electricity?

SDG&E power lines have been blamed by state investigators for causing three of the October 2007 wildfires that altogether killed two people and destroyed more than 1,300 homes in Ramona, Fallbrook, Rancho Bernardo, Poway, Rancho Santa Fe and other communities.

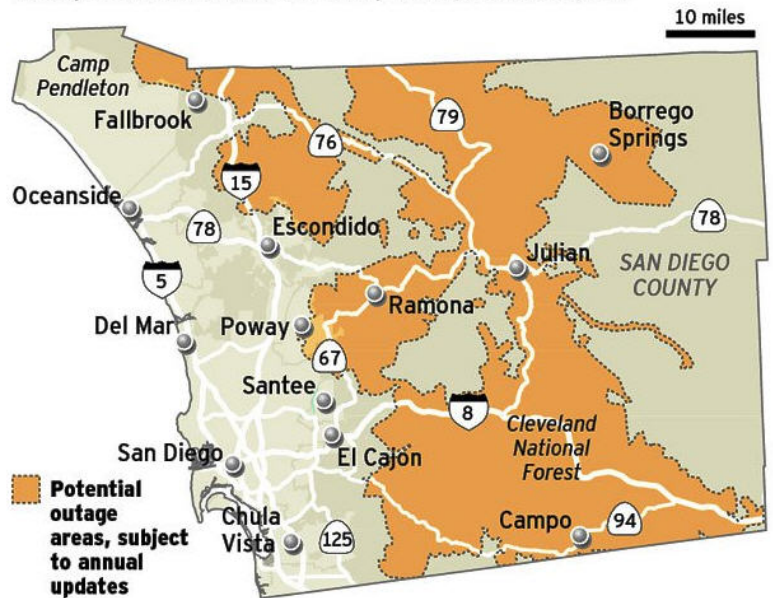
The utility has been sued by insurance companies, government agencies and hundreds of people seeking more than \$1 billion in damages.

The PUC will hold two hearings in April to take public comments on the shut-off plan and hopes to make a decision in August.

Highlights of SDG&E's report:

- The utility has identified 167 "incidents" since Aug. 9, 2003, that in some way relate to the company's equipment. Most were confined to the contact point or the equipment itself and did not result in a significant fire. They included contact by vehicles, birds, trees and vegetation, Mylar balloons and other objects, as well as equipment failures. Of those, 13 appear to be associated with high winds.

REVISED AREAS FOR POWER SHUTOFF PLAN SDG&E customers may face pre-emptive power outages during Santa Anas under the utility's fire-prevention plan.



SOURCES: SanGIS; SDG&E

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- Power would be shut off only when a series of conditions exists, including the National Weather Service declaring a red-flag warning, humidity dropping below 20 percent, moisture below 75 percent in living plants and 10 percent in dead brush, and winds blowing steadily above 34 mph or gusting above 54 mph with steady winds above 29 mph.

The 10 percent moisture level for dead brush lowers the threshold from the original plan, which called for a shutdown when brush reached 6 percent moisture. SDG&E spokeswoman Stephanie Donovan said the revised level is the result of further research.

- About 60,000 of SDG&E's 1.4 million customers could potentially be affected, which equates to about 148,500 people. That number would likely increase as the backcountry population grows.
- In the past eight years, there were 14 times when weather conditions would have triggered shut-offs in certain parts of the county, but not everywhere at once.
- The utility says it "stands ready to work with water utilities, communications providers, schools and other customers" on a one-to-one basis.
- For 2009, SDG&E will provide up to \$250 per household to low-income customers and special-needs customers who experience an emergency power shut-off. The money, in the form of a debit card, will be mailed or hand-delivered.

SDG&E says it is also working to develop additional assistance for households with disabled residents.

- There are 590 people in the areas where power could be shut off who require life-support equipment. Each would be contacted by the utility before power is shut down.

"The intent of this new program is to eliminate a potential ignition source during extreme weather conditions when fire risks are high," the report says.

"Because this is a new program, SDG&E recognizes that, through the application process, workshops, public input, community open houses and agency consultation, suggestions may arise that could change the plan. SDG&E welcomes any suggestion that would improve the safety of the electric system, enhance communication with customers and reduce restoration times without compromising safety."

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