



October 1, 2021

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
The Honorable Anna G. Eshoo
698 Emerson Street
Palo Alto, California 94301

Dear Congresswoman Eshoo,

Thank you for your letter regarding Pacific Gas and Electric Company's (PG&E) wildfire prevention efforts and our Enhanced Powerline Safety Settings. We know that the communities you represent have been greatly impacted by these recent outages, we share your concern, and we have been taking swift and comprehensive action to improve. We fully understand the need to improve both the reliability of our electric service, as well as our communication to our customers. We agree wholeheartedly that safety and reliability are not mutually exclusive and are working nonstop to deliver the results our customers and communities expect and deserve.

We have all seen the devastating wildfires this year, such as the Dixie Fire and the Caldor Fire, that our state has been experiencing. Severe drought conditions are driving an increased potential for wildfires as extremely dry vegetation can rapidly fuel fires from human ignitions or even a lightning strike. Given these environmental conditions, a tree contacting a single powerline can lead to overwhelming damage and destruction. Wildfires from trees falling into powerlines have the potential to become catastrophic, even outside of the wind-driven (Red Flag Warning) weather events that are typically associated with major wildfires. As wildfire risk continues to grow throughout California and the Western United States, we are taking the stand that catastrophic wildfires shall stop. This cannot continue.

In this new environment, we are looking at all options to keep communities safe and taking bold steps to prevent wildfires. One of these steps is to adjust the sensitivity of powerline safety settings. These new settings increase the speed at which safety devices will automatically turn off power if a foreign object contacts an energized line.

Since these adjusted settings were implemented in late July on more than 160 circuits in high fire-risk areas, **PG&E has seen a 50% decrease in reportable ignitions**, as compared to the prior three-year average, and a **60% decrease compared to last year**. This is a drastic reduction in the risk of major wildfires and is helping to protect lives, homes and the environment.

At the end of this letter are images that were recently captured by our patrol teams as they worked to restore power. They show real examples of times when, without these new settings, communities at the highest risk of wildfire could have experienced a major wildfire.

At the same time, we understand losing power is a burden on our customers and carries its own serious safety risks. The lengthy outages some of our customers have experienced are absolutely not acceptable. We must and will do better for them. Here are some of the steps the company is taking right now:

- Fine-tuning the sensitivity of each protection device to reduce the outage impact for our customers without compromising the wildfire risk reduction on each circuit
- Improving operational coordination between devices to automatically limit outage size
- Enhancing restoration patrols to restore power more quickly when it goes out
- Trouble shooting each outage and taking steps to address potential causes (for example, conducting expanded vegetation management work)
- Pursuing advancements in our approach to restoration that will enable us to share better information with customers during an outage

Below please find answers to the specific questions that you had raised.

In what areas of PG&E's service territory has the utility installed new safety equipment likely to increase the frequency and duration of power outages? How many ratepayers in Santa Cruz County are affected by these changes?

To help protect the customers and communities we serve, we have adjusted settings to circuits that service approximately 20,000 residents in Santa Cruz County. Across our service area, we have made this adjustment in areas that are at the highest risk of wildfire, based on such factors as potential ignition risk associated with equipment, risk of wildfire spreading if one were to occur and challenges to exiting a community in the event of an evacuation.

This is not new equipment. We have adjusted the protection device settings on circuits to quickly turn off power if the line has been struck by a foreign object or if the equipment experiences an issue.

Has PG&E considered alternative measures to reduce wildfire risks from its equipment without sacrificing reliability? If so, why were they not implemented?

These recent device safety settings are just one of the new safety enhancements PG&E has put in place for the duration of wildfire season, including:

- Beginning to underground 10,000 miles of distribution powerlines in High Fire-Threat District (HFTD) areas as part of an unprecedented, multiyear effort
- Responding to all outages in high fire-risk areas as an emergency response
- Proactively applying preventative fire retardant to poles and underneath powerlines in targeted high-risk locations
- Strengthening the electric system with stronger poles and covered powerlines
- Conducting enhanced vegetation management work above and beyond state standards

More information on our wildfire efforts is also available in our [2021 Wildfire Mitigation Plan](#).

What efforts is PG&E taking to better communicate with ratepayers who lose power due to these new safety measures and to restore power more quickly in the future?

As we discuss above, PG&E has heard loud and clear the burden these outages are causing and that we must improve. While we have made the overall system safer with these new settings, improvements can be made to reduce the length and frequency of these outages.

We have recently adjusted our device settings and patrolling methods to help decrease the length of outages. Previous practices required crews to patrol the entirety of the circuit experiencing one of these outages – from where the outage originated to the end of the line. With these new changes, PG&E crews will only need to patrol the section of line from the start of the outage to the next protective device. This will ensure no issues exist that could spark an ignition while also likely decreasing the amount of time it takes to restore power. Our engineering experts are using the latest data to keep the power system stable.

The length of the outage and the portion of customers restored will vary depending on the time and location that the fault occurs, as well as the severity of the damage. Depending on where the trouble is located on the circuit, outages should on average be smaller and take less time to restore.

PG&E will continue to take action to study, learn and further adjust protective device settings to allow for better coordination and to fine-tune the sensitivity. These device optimization changes should reduce the size of the outages and therefore allow for quicker restoration times. Indeed, we have seen early indications that subsequent outages have been smaller, and we have been able to restore them more quickly when they do occur.

In regard to customer communication, we began this program with a laser focus on safety and recognize that we did not have the necessary communications in place. Customers were rightly surprised and frustrated with these unexpected outages. To help rectify this, we are improving communications, both before and during outages. In addition to notifying all customers potentially impacted by these outages via postcard and email, we are:

- Improving the notifications that we provide to customers during outages, with more accurate information about when they can expect power to be restored
- Increasing our outreach and communications to impacted customers, including via email and direct mail
- Hosting community meetings in areas that have been frequently impacted by outages to take feedback and answer questions
 - We hosted two webinars for Santa Cruz County on Thursday, September 23. The first webinar took place from 12–1:30 p.m. for the Corralitos and Watsonville areas. One hundred fifty-nine individuals attended live and more than 40 questions and comments were submitted. The second webinar took place from 5:30–7 p.m. for the San Lorenzo Valley area. A total of 469 individuals attended live and more than 300 questions and comments were submitted.
- Increasing our social media and local media outreach efforts to grow awareness, including posts on social media sites Nextdoor and Facebook
- Utilizing paid advertising on local radio and social feeds
- Providing generator rebates to customers who rely on well water, customers in our Medical Baseline Program and certain small businesses
- Offering portable batteries for eligible customers in our Medical Baseline Program who live in high fire-threat areas
- Coordinating closely with telecommunications providers to inform them in near-real time of outage location and anticipated duration
- Working closely with critical facilities, including hospitals and schools in the highest impact areas, and when feasible, providing backup power

As updates and improvements are made to these settings, we will continue to communicate those to customers and stakeholders.

We appreciate your continued partnership as we work to mitigate the wildfire threat in California. These adjusted settings are drastically decreasing the risk of wildfire for our most vulnerable service territory. While we are tenaciously focused on making sure catastrophic wildfires stop, we know this must be done without creating additional hardships for the customers and communities we are privileged to serve.

If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Patricia K. Poppe
CEO, PG&E Corporation

Examples of tree and branch damage to powerlines found in the Santa Cruz Mountains during safety patrols to restore power:



