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OVERSIGHT HEARING

The California Public Utilities Commission and the Public Advocates Office Annual Update to the Legislature

A Focus on Wildfires, Power Shutoffs, and COVID-19: Are Electric Utilities Prepared for the Wildfire Season?

BACKGROUND

On the heels of two of the state's most catastrophic wildfire seasons (in 2017 and 2018) where some of the most damaging and deadly fires were sparked by electric utility infrastructure. Last fall, the state's largest electric utilities utilized widespread proactive power shutoffs in an effort to prevent igniting fires with their equipment. While the duration and frequency of the power shutoff events varied by, and within, each electric utility service territory, in many of the circumstances the power was off for multiple days, in some cases over a week at a time. In total, over two million California residents endured the loss of power, in communities located in about 40 of the state's 58 counties, the majority within the electric service territory of Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E). The electric utilities to shutoff power may have helped mitigate the risk of fires, but resulted in numerous impacts to communities. These impacts included: widespread unplanned school closures; traffic stymied from traffic signals not operating; the loss of phone and internet service for many residents; closed businesses and losses in product inventory that requires refrigeration; lost wages for workers from the closed businesses; increases in patients seeking power for their medical devices at hospitals and other clinic; challenges for those unable to be

transported to a location to charge their medical devices; and many other impacts where the use of electricity was no longer available. These incidents became even more challenging as wildfires in both northern (including the Kincaid Fire) and southern California (including Saddleridge and Maria Fires) also meant some evacuations needed to be executed with no reliable phone or communication service, traffic signals not operating, and hospitals struggling to keep the lights on (even with existing backup generating resources). Additionally, customer efforts to understand what and where the loss of power was happening were hampered as electric utility websites were down – including PG&E’s and Southern California Edison’s (SCE). The utilities were not prepared to manage the increased traffic to their websites from the widespread nature of the outages and notifications. There were also reports about unreliable maps and confusing information regarding geographic areas that would be affected, this was especially acute in the PG&E territory. Customers who rely on electricity for medical devices struggled to find alternative sources of power or transportation to get to any of the limited community resource centers available to them, or to make contact with anyone who could help. The State agencies, including Health and Human Resources, attempted to provide additional support. Local agencies, including counties, cities and special districts, from first responders to water utilities, struggled to provide support for their residents.

In the midst of the October 2019 power shutoffs, the governor sent a letter to the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and to PG&E expressing his concerns and expectations regarding the use of the shutoffs. The CPUC also sent letters to the electric utilities: PG&E, SCE, and San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E). Notably, the CPUC held an emergency meeting on October 18, 2019, regarding the power shutoff events in PG&E electric service territory. PG&E’s Chief Executive Officer Bill Johnson expressed his views that the company had areas to improve but that the power shutoff tool would be needed, potentially for as long as 10 years, until the utility could implement sufficient other measures, such as grid hardening, sectionalizing, and other measures that would reduce the need for proactive power shutoffs. The CPUC also sent letters to the electric utilities directing them to share information with first responders about customers on medical baseline programs who require electricity to operate medical devices and another regarding the need to share information with the counties and tribal governments. Additionally, the CPUC announced it would open an investigation into the conduct of the electric utilities to ensure they appropriately balanced the requirements to provide safe and reliable service when planning and executing their recent public safety power shutoffs (PSPS) events.

On November 18, 2019, this committee held an eight-hour oversight hearing to better understand what exactly transpired during the October power shutoff events that resulted in the debacles that impacted so many of the state's residents, including some with medical conditions. The committee heard from the three electric utilities, relevant state agencies, including the CPUC, affected residents, businesses, service providers and critical facilities, among others. The hearing focused on lessons learned and areas that merit additional attention.

Now, over six months since the November hearing and on the cusp of this year's wildfire season, while sheltering-in-place orders have limited mobility and activity in the state due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the need to ensure the electric utilities are better prepared for this year's wildfire season is even more critically important.

This hearing will allow members of the committee to receive an update from the CPUC on specific actions taken since last fall to address the shortcomings of the electric utilities' plans and operations, including their recent review of the utilities wildfire mitigation plans, and updated protocols for using proactive power shutoffs. Additionally, the members of the committee will hear directly from the three electric utilities about the status of the implementation of their wildfire mitigation plans and the new guidelines on power shutoffs, as well as, how the utilities are adjusting their plans in light of the COVID-19 global health pandemic. The updates provided at the hearing are intended to inform the committee members about what might be expected in this year's wildfire season as compared to years past. Witnesses have been asked to provide the following information:

- What improvements have been made to the electric system, operations, communications, and mitigation, in order to address the myriad of issues experienced last fall and those that previously resulted in catastrophic fires?
- What, if any, gaps exist in relation to the electric utilities' preparedness for wildfire season? How (and by when) are those gaps expected to be addressed?
- How is the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in changes to operations for wildfire mitigation and power shutoff protocols?

Lastly, given the uncertainties of the global pandemic and the continued need to limit social congregating, the committee will also hear from the Public Advocates Office and the CPUC in fulfillment of the statutorily required annual update to this committee.