

For the Most Vulnerable, California Blackouts ‘Can Be Life or Death’

As the widespread outages in the state continued for a second day, fears grew for sick and older residents and those who rely on medical equipment.



By Thomas Fuller

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MORAGA, Calif. — When Ben Faus went to bed at his home in the foothills above the Monterey Bay, he knew there was a chance his power would go out but he didn't know exactly when. About 3 a.m. on Thursday he was jolted awake because his sleep apnea breathing machine stopped working.

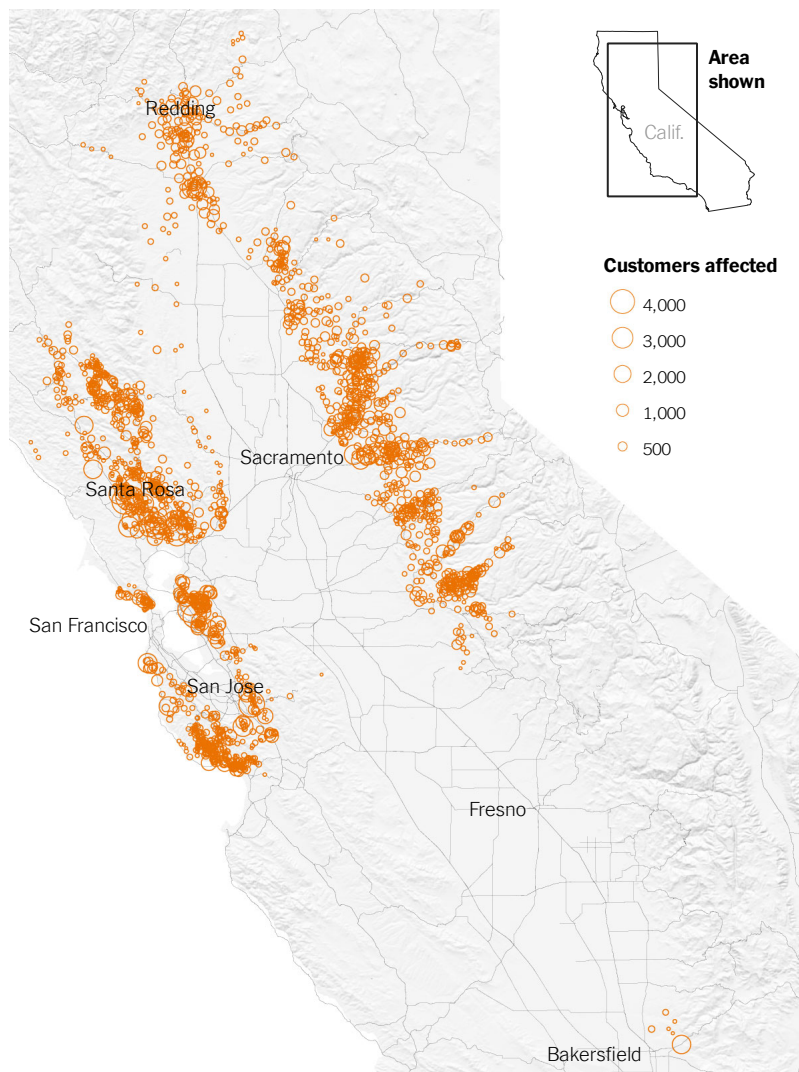
“All of a sudden, I was like, ‘I can't breathe,’” he said.

The decision to turn electricity off for large areas of Northern California inconvenienced and frustrated hundreds of thousands of residents, but it became increasingly dangerous for people like Mr. Faus and the state's most vulnerable.

Around 600,000 customers were still without power on Thursday afternoon and there was no clear indication of when it might be restored. That uncertainty heightened residents' anger as food spoiled and businesses and schools stayed closed.

PG&E Public Safety Power Shut-Offs in California

As of 2:15 p.m. Pacific on Thursday.





Source: California Office of Emergency Services • By Jugal K. Patel

But the biggest fears were for the sick and older residents and those who rely on medical devices and equipment like electric wheelchairs.

“For people with disabilities it can be life or death,” said Sunday Parker, who uses a wheelchair and lives in Oakland, parts of which were affected by the shutdown.

Although many medical facilities said they had prepared for the outage — ordering extra oxygen tanks and installing generators, for example — the uncertain timing of the blackout spawned confusion. Pacific Gas & Electric, the utility that turned off the power, wavered on when it would start the blackout a number of times before the second stage of power cuts finally came late on Wednesday. The first stage, which had cut power for around 500,000 residents, had come earlier that day.

Most of the concern was focused on people living on their own at home. The California Department of Public Health said about 39 hospitals and 103 skilled nursing facilities had been affected by the blackout, as of Thursday evening.

Jan Emerson-Shea, a spokeswoman for the California Hospital Association, a trade group, said none of the hospitals have reported any significant effects on their patient services.

Hospitals in the state are required to have backup generators, which usually start running within seconds of a power failure, Ms. Emerson-Shea said.

Across the region, the power shut-off made for odd juxtapositions. In some places, a road separated those with power and those without. At the Sequoias in Portola Valley, a retirement home in the hills above Silicon Valley, only one phone was functioning and the facility had only partial power from a generator. Cellphone service was down. But in the valley below, tech companies like Google and Apple operated with full power.

And in Woodside, a wealthy suburb above Silicon Valley, residents used generators to keep their wine collections cool and sent out notices offering to store their neighbors' best bottles.

On a gusty day when a number of wildfires were reported across the state, firefighters remained on alert. The combination of strong winds and dried-out vegetation after the long California summer has brought on peak fire season. It was during similar conditions two years ago that fires tore through wine country north of San Francisco.

Steve Anderson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said average wind gusts in the San Francisco Bay Area reached 40 to 60 miles per hour on Wednesday and Thursday. But Friday, he said, would bring relief.

“Winds will be dying down dramatically,” Mr. Anderson said.

More gentle winds are a key factor in reducing fire hazards, allowing Pacific Gas & Electric to turn the power back on. But the company says it may take five days before the power lines are completely re-energized, and it remains unclear how long some people will have to wait to fully regain electricity.

PG&E's power shut-offs are part of the company's wildfire safety program, which the utility developed in response to state requirements put into place after the wine country fires.

Strong winds and dry conditions have been implicated in several major California wildfires started by PG&E's equipment. The company has said that one of its transmission lines probably started the state's largest wildfire known as the Camp Fire, which killed 86 people and destroyed the town of Paradise in November last year.

Although PG&E and at least one other utility have carried out these so-called preventive power cuts previously, this week's shut-off was by far the largest.

Thousands of customers in parts of Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino and Kern Counties were also without power Thursday afternoon after Southern California Edison, the state's second-largest investor-owned utility after PG&E, began implementing planned outages.

Nearly 174,000 customers across nine counties in Central and Southern California have been notified about possible shut-offs, said Mary Ann Milbourn, a spokeswoman for the utility.

On Thursday afternoon, as Santa Ana winds whipped through Southern California, a wildfire erupted in Calimesa, about 75 miles east of Los Angeles in Riverside County, and bore down on the Villa Calimesa Mobile Home Park. The authorities issued mandatory evacuation orders, and warned of a threat to the power grid and a nearby railway line. There were also several other smaller fires burning in Southern California.

The blaze in Calimesa “is burning a lot of structures,” said Scott McLean, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. He said there were “numerous medical emergencies” inside the mobile home park.

“It’s multiple little fires everywhere, because the winds are throwing embers,” Mr. McLean said.

In Northern California, both households and businesses were hoping the power shut-off would end before they were forced to throw away food.

A stone’s throw from the shores of the Monterey Bay, uncertainty about when power might return fueled frustration and anxiety at businesses on the Central Coast.

At the New Leaf Community Market in the coastal town of Aptos, large refrigerated trucks were brought in to offload and temporarily store perishables.

At the Seascape resort, the owner of Hong Kong Garden restaurant said he regretted placing an order last night for fresh shrimp, scallops and lettuce from local suppliers, only to worry that he would have throw everything away the next day.

After a generator blew early Thursday at El Patio Grocery in La Selva Beach, the store’s manager, David Castillo said he was concerned that items like milk and deli meats might go bad. He juggled which products to keep cold.

“We haven’t had ice in two days,” said Mr. Castillo, whose power at his home across the street was still on.

While it is too early to calculate the total economic cost of the shutdown, Michael Wara, a climate and energy expert at Stanford University, has come up with some estimates.

Mr. Wara, who lost power at his home in Mill Valley at 2 a.m. on Wednesday and has no hot water, internet connection or cellular service, estimated that the disruption could cost the state anywhere from \$65 million to \$2.5 billion.

Whatever the outcome, the outage will probably make only a small dent in California’s multitrillion-dollar economy.

“It’s a manageable loss,” Mr. Wara said. “It’s definitely a lot smaller than the losses that have been caused by wildfires in Northern California over the last couple of years.”

But even beyond the economic cost there was the nuisance of canceled meetings, spotty cellular service and intersections without traffic lights.

At the University of California, Berkeley, much of which was running on emergency power Thursday, researchers worried about keeping laboratory animals alive and well.

Faculty, students and nonessential staff generally were asked to stay home, but some staff members were tasked with looking after lab specimens and chemicals, said Randy Howard Katz, the vice chancellor for research.

“Beyond life safety being our highest priority, the campus’s highest research priority is to protect our research animals,” Professor Katz said.

Professor Katz called the power shutdown “enormously disruptive.”

Many in the region braced for the days ahead.

At Moraga Royale, an assisted-living facility in Moraga, a town in the San Francisco Bay Area, the motion sensor doors didn’t work, the lights were dim and televisions were inoperable because of the power cut. A generator provided minimal electricity but not enough to keep all of the facility’s food cold. But Dianne Wilson, the director, said residents were adapting.

“They are handling it better than the young people with all their cellphones,” she said.

Reporting was contributed by Lauren Hepler from San Jose, Calif.; Carol Pogash from Berkeley, Calif.; Tim Arango from Los Angeles; and David Yaffe-Bellany, Anemona Hartocollis, Aimee Ortiz and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs from New York.