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Power lines keep sparking wildfires. Why don't California utility companies bury them?

By Tony Bizjak, Sophia Bollag and Dale Kasler The Sacramento Bee Nov 16, 2018

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Flames burn near power lines in Sycamore Canyon near West Mountain Drive in Montecito.

Mike Eliason

Why don't they just put the damn power lines underground?

In fire-scarred California communities, that question is being posed, often angrily, as evidence mounts that the state's traditional overhead electrical power grid is at times a liability, culpable for starting some of the state's biggest blazes.

Cal Fire investigators this summer said they believe at least 17 major wildfires in Northern California last year were caused by problems with power lines.

Southern California Edison officials acknowledged last month their equipment helped spark the Thomas Fire that raged through Ventura County in December, destroying 1,000 buildings and leading to a landslide that killed 22 people.

In Butte County this week, some fingers are pointing at a malfunctioning Pacific Gas & Electric line as the possible launch pad for the worst fire in state history, the Camp Fire, which wiped out the town of Paradise, killing at least 63 people and destroying more than 9,700 homes.

The cause of that fire has not yet been determined, and investigators are pursuing several leads, including more than one ignition point.

State regulators point out that overall, only about 10 percent or less of the state's wildfires are triggered by power line issues. But they acknowledge the state's 176,000-mile system of overhead electrified lines has played a role in igniting some of the biggest and most destructive fires in recent years.

So why not bury the problem?

One California utility company plans to do that. San Diego Gas & Electric officials said next year they will begin converting 20 miles of overhead wires to underground in a high fire-risk area around Cuyamaca Rancho State Park and the town of Campo, where the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Border Patrol has a station.

The San Diego utility also is exploring a dozen other areas for potential future undergrounding of wires, with fire safety as the main reason, a spokesman said.

Officials at PG&E, which serves much of Northern California, said they are working on a test project that would put power lines underground along the Bohemian Highway in Sonoma County where thousands live among densely wooded hillsides.

Utilities often now put power underground in newer urban developments, but that is typically for esthetics and traffic movement, not explicitly for fire safety.

The state's top electricity safety regulatory official, Elizaveta Malashenko of the California Public Utilities Commission, said running power lines underground is far from a panacea. And, in most cases, it's simply not worth the cost, she said.

"Underground is about 10 times more expensive than overhead," said Malashenko, who is the PUC safety and enforcement division director. "If we were to underground (throughout) California, all our rates would go up ten times."

Malashenko, utility officials and even utility critics point out that there are other good reasons not to go underground: California is prime earthquake country and seismic activity is more likely to disrupt underground wires than overhead wires. Underground wires also are susceptible to flood damage, and are more difficult to perform maintenance on because often they are buried under roads. Underground utilities also are trickier to troubleshoot when issues, such as outages, occur.

But Malashenko and others acknowledge the cost of undergrounding in some areas may be viewed more favorably if the financial and human costs of fires continue to mount in California.

Already, analysts said, fire liability costs are putting PG&E in financial peril.

Those concerns led the president of the California Public Utilities Commission Thursday to say he would expand an ongoing PUC review of PG&E's operations investigation into the utility's operations.

"I will open a new phase examining the corporate governance, structure and operation of PG&E, including in light of the recent wildfires, to determine the best path forward for Northern Californians to receive safe electrical and gas service in the future," Michael Picker said in a press statement.

Picker earlier had told The San Francisco Chronicle it would not be good business to let PG&E go bankrupt.

PG&E is looking for access to more borrowing power, anticipating having to make further potential fire-related lawsuit payouts.

"We agree with CPUC President Picker's statement that an essential component of providing safe electrical service is long-term financial stability," spokeswoman Lynsey Paulo said in an emailed statement. "Access to affordable capital is critical to carrying out safety measures and meeting California's bold clean energy goals.

"Recently passed legislation recognized the importance of financially healthy utilities to California electric customers and implementing it quickly is important to achieve that goal."

The question of what steps utility companies should take to protect the public from fire, and what the state should do to assist PG&E financially in the face of fire-related liabilities, has been a hot topic this year at the state Capitol. It's prompted by what Gov. Jerry Brown recently called the "new abnormal" caused by changing weather patterns -- longer dry spells, temperature extremes and high winds.

Utility companies previously only had to worry about high fire risk from August through October. Now, the state's so-called "fire season" starts earlier and ends later. The Thomas fire hit bone-dry Ventura in December and burned through Christmas and New Year's Day. This week's Camp Fire in Paradise struck after what officials said were 210 straight days without rain.

The state PUC came out with tougher controls earlier this year, and the state Legislature passed a controversial bill that includes financial assistance for utilities, but also requirements for more maintenance and system upgrades.

The new law, SB901, is wide-ranging. Starting in 2019, it will require utility companies' fire mitigation plans to include vegetation clearing around power lines, electrical equipment inspections and protocols for cutting power in weather that could trigger fires. It also requires the state commission that regulates utilities to work with the state's firefighting agency to prevent fires and doubles maximum penalties when utilities don't comply with safety regulations.

SB901 notably calls for utilities to consider several safety measures as part of their plans to avoid fires, including moving power lines underground, as well as putting insulation around wires and replacing poles.

Leaders in the Legislature say they don't have specific plans yet for any further wildfire-related legislation in the upcoming session. But devastation in Butte County from the Camp Fire -- and the ongoing threat of more deadly fires -- makes it likely lawmakers will take up the issue.

"We need to make our communities safer; support rebuilding our ravaged communities and better support our emergency response and alert systems to help us prepare for the next fire," Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins said in a statement.

Atkins spokeswoman Lizelda Lopez said the San Diego Democrat needs to confer with her colleagues to develop specific plans.

One Sacramento critic, state Sen. Jerry Hill, a San Mateo Democrat, said the state should consider a more radical approach: Reform the massive utility companies and take away their profit motive.

"PG&E, I've found, is more concerned about Wall Street than they ever have been with safety," Hill said. "We can't go on this way. We can't have our state destroyed every year."

Utility companies, meanwhile, say they are ensuring more safety by taking steps to "harden" the grid, including the tree abatement, synthetic coating of wires, and replacement of wood with steel poles being pushed by the Legislature.

They also are employing a controversial new tool PG&E calls a "public safety power shutoff program." It involves temporarily cutting power to areas when weather and wind reports indicate high fire danger.

San Diego Gas & Electric pioneered the concept in 2013, and has used it about a dozen times since, officials there estimated. That includes this week, when it shut off power for several days to 24,000 customers due to 86-mile-per-hour Santa Ana winds and dry conditions. The agency then sent out foot patrols and inspectors in helicopters Wednesday to check lines before turning the power back on.

"This has been a very significant Santa Ana (winds), we've been taking this very seriously," San Diego utility spokesman Joe Britton said.

After being stung by costly lawsuits from fires in 2003 and 2007, the San Diego utility has installed 177 weather stations in high-wind areas, along with smoke detectors, and hi-definition and infrared cameras for night viewing.

PG&E instituted its power shutoff program this year. Spokeswoman Lynsey Paulo said the utility realizes higher fire risk from new weather patterns require "a much more bold and aggressive response."

The shut-downs present a safety risk as well, cutting power for refrigerators, medical devices and cell phone charging. PG&E has set up a text, email, phone call and at times door-knocking warning system, and asks customers in vulnerable areas to sign up online for alerts.

The company has shut power off purposely as a preemptive measure only once, in October to 60,000 users. Paulo said the agency considers that a step of last resort.

PG&E had planned to shut off some power distribution lines last week in nine counties, including Butte, in expectation of winds and dry conditions, but choose not to because the adverse conditions did not meet shut-off criteria.

That criteria includes a red flag fire-risk warning declaration by the National Weather Service, humidity levels below 20 percent, forecast sustained winds over 25 miles per hour with 45 mph gusts, fuel dryness levels, and on the ground PG&E crew observations of local conditions.

Paulo said PG&E has begun talking with some communities about the possibility of undergrounding lines for fire protection, but she said that is not a focus.

"Undergrounding isn't a solution to deal with (the) immediate wildfire threat. It can take years to complete."

PUC's lead safety official Malashenko as well said the state recognizes the need to do more right now to mitigate overhead wire issues.

"We are facing unprecedented conditions in California," she said. "We are facing a crisis at the state that has not been faced before."

"The solutions exist, but they are not obvious."

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