



Homes burn in Santa Rosa on Oct. 9, 2017. The wine country fires, along with other blazes in Northern California, killed 44 people and produced \$9.5 billion in insurance claims. Kent Porter The Press Democrat via AP



## CALIFORNIA FORUM

# If PG&E started the wine country fires, they should pay. Don't blame climate change.

BY PATRICK MCCALLUM

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My wife and I almost died in [last year's wine country fire](#). Like our neighbors, we lost nearly everything we owned in the blaze. More than 6,000 homes were destroyed, 44 people died and more than 200,000 acres were scorched, causing billions of dollars in damage. Now all of us who suffered are about to get burned again if PG&E gets its way at the Capitol.

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PG&E is suspected of igniting the inferno by failing to properly maintain its equipment and remove trees too close to its power lines. It's not the first time. Last April, the Public Utilities Commission [hit PG&E with an \\$8.3 million fine for failing to maintain a power line that started the Butte Fire](#) two years earlier, in which two people died and 549 homes were destroyed.

Fearing it will again be found negligent, [PG&E has been holding closed-door meetings with policymakers in Sacramento](#), quietly lobbying to change the state's liability laws to shield itself and its corporate shareholders

from any financial responsibility for this or any other disasters it may cause in the future.

PG&E is telling policymakers that climate change ignited the blaze and will increasingly cause more fires – and because of this, the utility shouldn't be held liable now or in the future, even if found to be negligent. Because the earth is warming, PG&E says taxpayers, not company shareholders, should shoulder the cost of lawsuits, firefighting and other expenses incurred when its electrical equipment causes fires, no matter how poorly maintained.

Climate change didn't keep PG&E from investing in safety or maintaining its equipment; poor management and corporate greed did. Despite its suspected role in last year's deadly fires, the annual salary for [PG&E's CEO was doubled to \\$8.6 million last year](#). Six other top executives at the company received similar pay raises.

When PG&E filed for bankruptcy in 2003, company executives received millions of dollars in bonuses. Last year, when PG&E was convicted of six felony offenses relating to its fatal San Bruno gas explosion that killed eight people, [executives were rewarded with higher salaries](#), while [ratepayers got higher utility bills](#). It was later learned that [PG&E had used millions of ratepayer dollars earmarked for gas line upgrades to instead fund pay raises](#) for top executives. People died because of that decision.

In addition to rewarding poor management, PG&E invests heavily in politics. Since 2015, the company has spent \$5.2 million on lobbying, and another \$4.8 million on campaign contributions and political action. When PG&E speaks in Sacramento, legislators listen.

That's bad news for California taxpayers and the wine country fire victims who lost everything. If PG&E gets its way at the Capitol, we'll all lose even more.



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