

New PG&E reports show widespread problems during Wine Country fires

PG&E inspectors reported issues with trees toppling power lines.

San Jose Mercury News

10.31.2017

State regulators on Tuesday revealed that PG&E reported at least 17 “electric safety incidents” across eight counties the night of this month’s destructive Wine Country fires, blaming downed trees and heavy winds for damaging power lines and other equipment that is the focus of an investigation into the deadliest wildfires in California history.

The reports offer PG&E’s first detailed acknowledgement of widespread problems with its power lines and nearby trees on that fateful night. They come as the state’s insurance commissioner on Tuesday reported insured losses from the October blazes have now topped \$3 billion and warned the number is “sure to grow.”

The staggering figure looms over PG&E, which could be on the hook for billions of dollars in damages if the utility is found responsible for the fires. The utility company is charged with maintaining its power lines and the vegetation around them to prevent wildfires.

In reports made public Tuesday by the California Public Utilities Commission, PG&E reported downed power lines and broken trees on Oct. 8-9 at at least four locations in Sonoma County, including in Kenwood, Santa Rosa, Glen Ellen and Geyserville. Fallen or broken trees damaged equipment at at least three locations in Napa County, and one near Ukiah in Mendocino. The utility company also identified problems at two locations in Nevada County and two more in Butte County.

More than half a dozen fires – including the Atlas and Nuns fires in Napa County, the Tubbs fire in Sonoma County, the Redwood fire in Mendocino County, the Cherokee fire in Butte County and the Lobo fire in Nevada County – killed 43 people. On Tuesday, state officials updated the damage: More than 14,700 homes, 728 businesses and 3,600 vehicles were damaged or destroyed.

Attorneys

Frank M. Pitre

Practice Areas

Commercial Litigation

Personal Injury & Wrongful Death

NEW PG&E REPORTS SHOW WIDESPREAD PROBLEMS DURING WINE COUNTRY FIRES

“As shocking as \$3 billion in insured losses are, the number is sure to grow, as more claims are coming,” Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones said.

Days after the fires, a Bay Area News Group review of emergency dispatch calls in Sonoma County showed authorities had fielded a number of calls of power lines falling down and electrical transformers exploding.

Many of the specifics had been unclear, but the incident reports released Tuesday began to offer a glimpse into how widespread the problems were. The reports offered only brief details, and the PUC redacted exact locations of the trouble spots to prevent people from tampering with evidence.

In a statement, PG&E spokesman Donald Cutler said, “The information provided in these reports is preliminary and PG&E is fully cooperating with the investigations of Cal Fire and the PUC. There has been no determination on the causes of the fires.”

A PG&E inspector reported one incident at 11:35 p.m. Oct. 8 of a “wire down and broken tree” near Ukiah in Mendocino County, where the Redwood fire killed at least nine people. “PG&E found the top section of a broken tree near where the downed conductor was located,” reads the report.

In a separate incident report filed Oct. 10 and referring to an Oct. 8 incident, PG&E compliance specialist Charles Filmer reported a broken tree and downed wires in the Kenwood area of Sonoma County, which was badly damaged by fires at that time. “An approximately 60-foot eucalyptus tree that was rooted approximately 50 feet from the lines had fallen, taking down all three primary conductors to the ground,” he wrote.

Another compliance specialist, Laxmi Terala, filed another report noting that on Oct. 8, a PG&E first responder “noticed a possible issue with the secondary conductor” near a pair of structures that suffered fire damage in Santa Rosa. The exact location is blacked out.

In the days after the fires began, PG&E initially blamed “hurricane strength winds in excess of 75 mph in some cases” for damaging its equipment. But a review earlier this month by this news organization of weather station readings found the winds were almost half that speed as the lines started to come down.

In several incident reports released Tuesday, including one regarding a location near Ukiah in Mendocino County, where the Redwood fire burned, and another near Nevada City in Nevada County, the location of the Lobo fire, PG&E noted that its meteorology department recorded wind speeds of 40-50 mph at nearby weather stations.

NEW PG&E REPORTS SHOW WIDESPREAD PROBLEMS DURING WINE COUNTRY FIRES

Scott McLean, a spokesman for Cal Fire said he had not had a chance to review the incident reports. He did not offer specifics on how the reports might factor into Cal Fire's investigation into the start of the fires or provide a time frame for when the investigations might be complete. "We have to be meticulous," McLean said. "We have to be thorough."

Sen. Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo, a frequent PG&E critic, said the reports were "intriguing" but too preliminary to draw any conclusions. For one, the reports don't indicate whether PG&E's equipment contributed or sparked the fires or were damaged because of them.

But Burlingame attorney Frank Pitre thinks the evidence is growing. He sued PG&E after the utility was found responsible by the state Public Utilities Commission for starting the Butte fire in Amador County in 2015 because of the utility's failure to maintain its power lines... *(To read the entire article, please click [HERE](#))*