

PG&E blackout nears for 35,000 in Bay Area, the weekend could be even worse

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Pacific Gas and Electric Co. says it will preemptively cut power to as many as 184,345 customers beginning Wednesday afternoon in an attempt to minimize fire dangers during dry and windy weather conditions for the second time this month.

Meanwhile, PG&E is already preparing for more blackouts this weekend that could affect a broader swath of Northern California.

The company said it will preemptively cut power around 2 p.m. Wednesday in the Sierra Foothills, 3 p.m. in North Bay counties and approximately 1 a.m. Thursday in San Mateo and Kern counties. Approximately 34,935 customers in the Bay Area are expected to be affected.

In a statement, PG&E officials said the decision “was based on forecasts of dry, hot and windy weather that poses a higher risk for damage and sparks on the electric system and rapid wildfire spread.”

Napa and Sonoma also are among the 17 counties that could be affected.

National Weather Service officials have predicted warm, dry and windy conditions Wednesday evening into Thursday afternoon.

Red flag warnings, which are issued to alert people of critical fire weather conditions, will activate for the North Bay at noon, the East Bay hills and valleys at 3 p.m. and Santa Cruz Mountains at 7 p.m. The warnings are expected to be lifted by 4 p.m. Thursday.

PG&E may implement more outages starting this weekend — and they could be more widespread. The company’s seven-day shut-off forecast published Wednesday shows an “elevated” likelihood that the company will turn off power in three of nine high-fire danger zones in its service territory on Saturday. Those zones are located north and west of the Bay Area.

On Sunday and Monday, eight of nine fire-danger zones, including much of the Bay Area, are listed in the “elevated” category, which is two designations below PG&E warning customers it will turn off power in an area.

“It’s too early to determine how many people might be affected by any potential event this weekend,” said utility spokeswoman Jennifer Robison. “We remain completely focused on the current Public Safety Power Shutoff scheduled for this afternoon and tonight.”

Robison added “there may be overlap” among customers “if there’s an event this coming weekend, but our goal is to restore everyone affected in the current shutoff.”

The company’s forecast says an offshore wind event on Sunday into Monday “may impact locations generally north of a Monterey to Yosemite line.”

“Details around this event remain unclear, but it has the potential to be as strong or stronger than recent events,” the forecast says. “In addition, dead fuel moisture will decrease significantly in the first event today and tomorrow, setting the stage to be critically dry and very susceptible to fire for the weekend event.”

PG&E officials said the peak period of winds in the next two days is expected to end around noon Thursday in the Sierra Foothills, North Bay and San Mateo County, and around noon Friday in Kern County. They plan to then inspect energy lines to ensure they were not damaged before restoring power.

Utility officials said they hope to restore power to “the vast majority of customers within 48 hours after the weather has passed.”

In Napa, blackouts could affect 7,718 homes and businesses , according to PG&E. In Sonoma, 26,845 customers and 893 medical customers potentially face blackouts.

San Mateo officials said they expect PG&E to cut power to 1,005 addresses, which include 23 medical baseline customers. Areas affected will include portions of Woodside, La Honda and surrounding unincorporated San Mateo County.

Robison said the company’s website, which was paralyzed by traffic during the first round of outages, was “fully functional” on Wednesday. Officials recommended customers use its search tools to determine if they will be affected, she added.

On Wednesday, an organization representing the state’s rural counties condemned utility officials for their handling the shut-offs and implored them to do better.

“The current notification and execution of [shut-off] events and subsequent restoration of power unnecessarily endanger lives and property, as well as the operation of critical infrastructure,” Rural County Representatives of California officials said in a statement.

“Our members have suffered the lion’s share of destruction caused by catastrophic wildfires over the past decade, and communities within our counties have experienced most of the state’s PSPS events,” said Matt Kingsley, RCRC Chair and Inyo County Supervisor, in a statement. “Communication and proper planning is key, particularly as we continue to learn more about the potential for profound impacts on California’s communities during PSPS events.”

On Tuesday, Gov. Gavin Newsom sent a letter to Bill Johnson, CEO of the utility’s parent company PG&E Corp., urging him to enhance communication with the company’s customers.

Widespread shut-offs started this year due to dangerous weather conditions similar to those that have sparked devastating fires in the last two years. Many of the 2017 fires in Wine Country were started by PG&E power lines, according to state investigators. PG&E equipment ignited the Camp Fire last year in Butte County, the worst fire in state history.

Any shut-offs will be less extensive than the cuts that affected more than 738,000 customers in 30 California counties earlier this month, officials said.

PG&E officials on Monday afternoon started notifying more than 200,000 customers of possible power cuts. Utility officials said the amount of customers decreased as they learned more about weather conditions.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/california-wildfires/article/PG-E-power-outages-Bay-Area-braces-for-new-round-14555960.php#>