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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON PANDEMIC
EMERGENCY RESPONSE

November 1, 2022

Alice Reynolds, President
California Public Utilities Commission
505 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, California 94103

Re: CPUC Oversight of Large Electric Utilities' Fast-Trip Outage Programs

Dear President Reynolds:

When PG&E implemented its first large-scale de-energization event in October 2019, its regulators, legislators, and customers were outraged at the scope and extent of the outages and the prospect that such events would be commonplace for at least a decade. The unequivocal message from the Commission and the Legislature was that Californians could not—and should not have to—live with that level of interruption to a fundamental and life-sustaining utility service. Three years later, PG&E's new fast-trip outage program has already quietly exceeded the number of customers impacted by PG&E's largest 2019 de-energization event, and is close to exceeding the total number of customers impacted by all of PG&E's 2019 outages, but there is no public effort by the Commission to bring these frequent and extensive outages under control. As it is currently deployed, fast-trip has effectively become a "stealth PSPS" program. It is imperative that the Commission grant the motion filed by East Bay Community Energy, Pioneer Community Energy, Sonoma Clean Power, Marin Clean Energy, and the Rural County Representatives of California for the Commission to scrutinize the large electric utilities' fast-trip outage programs and impose a robust regulatory framework, as it did with de-energization events.

PG&E's fast-trip program is causing significant impacts to the communities that we represent, and the voluminous and repeated outages create serious public safety risks. As of September 30th, 1,746,822 customer accounts (or approximately 3.5 to 5.25 million individuals) have lost power year-to-date; 473,062 customer accounts (between 946,000 and 1.4 million individuals) lost power in September alone. It is alarming to see outages of this scale when California has only just entered high fire season. These outages have lasted an average of six hours. That is enough time to lose a refrigerator full of food and an entire work or school day, which many impacted households and businesses cannot afford, particularly when the outages occur repeatedly. It must also be noted that in many rural communities, the outages can last days. Fast-trip is not a benign mechanical setting on PG&E's distribution lines, nor is it a small wildfire mitigation program that only needs to be monitored at a high level. The much-touted improvements that PG&E made to its fast-trip program after a disastrous surprise rollout in 2021 have proven insufficient; PG&E cannot continue to rest on its laurels, as the data from its monthly outage reports proves.

The harms to customers from these widespread and relentless outages are not theoretical, nor are they a mere inconvenience. These outages often occur during high fire hazard conditions and weather events. Wireless and landline communications networks frequently go down, notwithstanding the backup power requirements the Commission imposed, which leaves people unable to call for help, receive emergency warning and alert messages, or get basic information. Impacted customers lose the ability to pump well water, which compromises human health and harms families, livestock, and crops. Medically vulnerable

customers cannot plan for the outages to charge their devices or backup batteries, cannot prearrange transportation to an energized location, and cannot escape the looming threat of sudden power loss. 243,952 customer accounts (between approximately 488,000 and 732,000 individuals) lost power during the historic heat dome event in the first 10 days of September, which shattered heat records and posed a widespread danger to health and safety. Customers lost power while the Mosquito Fire was rapidly expanding, which put them at risk of missing evacuation warnings and being unable to charge electric cars. Additionally, PG&E has given no indication that it has considered what will happen when fast-trip settings are enabled when a major natural disaster occurs, like a wildfire or a large earthquake, or one of the high-wind events that are common during high fire season. These events could cause massive numbers of outages that, combined with extended restoration times, could significantly compound the effects of these disasters on our communities. The governing paradigm cannot be that customers are safest when the power is off.

The large electric utilities' increasing reliance on fast-trip outages to curb wildfire risk is also placing California's decarbonization goals at risk. Not only have the repeated outages and the utilities' backup generator rebate programs fostered a diesel-powered ghost grid, but widespread electrification for homes and vehicles will be significantly undercut if Californians cannot rely on the utilities' systems to be energized.

The increasing use of fast-trip settings is producing significant and cumulative community stress and frustration. Californians are losing trust in both their utility providers and the ability of regulatory and government institutions to keep them safe.

Scrutinizing the utilities' implementation of their fast-trip programs, imposing a regulatory framework, and exercising enforcement authority for unreasonable decisionmaking is squarely within the Commission's jurisdiction. As its enabling legislation provides, the Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety (Energy Safety) reviews the utilities' wildfire mitigation activities at a programmatic level, but the Commission is charged with ensuring the utilities are conducting their operations in a safe, reliable, and reasonable manner. This same inter-agency allocation of responsibility governed the Commission's de-energization Rulemaking and Energy Safety's scrutiny of de-energization programs as part of the utilities' Wildfire Mitigation Plans, and Californians are safer as a result of both agencies' efforts. The de-energization Rulemaking produced extensive rules governing the conduct, mitigation, restoration, and reporting required for de-energization events. Fast-trip outages create the same types of potentially disastrous impacts for affected residents, but the Commission has no similar framework in place. That must change.

Californians cannot be forced to choose between a safe *or* reliable electrical grid. To achieve the state's climate change goals and to protect public safety, we believe the Commission must take action on this critical issue. Should you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at 916-651-4008.

Warm regards,



ANDREAS BORGEAS
8th Senate District