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PG&E responds to concerns about dead and dying trees, outlines plan for outages

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

removing trees and debris, taking care to follow regulations regarding the safety of bees and nesting birds, she noted.

Guarino also said that the company is looking at locating a Community Resource Center inside the Orinda Community Center, which would also provide a place where Orinda residents could cool off or recharge devices during a power outage.

PG&E's territory spans California from Bakersfield to the Oregon border, serving an estimated 15 million people, based on its five million customer accounts. Within its territory, Guarino said 130 million dead trees have been identified. Not all of these trees are located near power lines, he said, but this shows the effects of climate change and drought. The company has also just completed inspections of all 150,000 towers, using helicopter, drones, fixed wing aircraft, and personnel on foot, and found 10,000 towers in need of immediate follow up. When problems are discovered, Guarino said, the company will drop what it is doing and immediately address the problems.

There is a range of immediate and long-term solutions planned. System hardening will involve coating lines and replacing wood poles with metal poles. The replacement program will span over about 10 years. To further reduce the risk of wildfires, PG&E is disabling automatic reclosing of circuit breakers and reclosers on lines in high fire-risk areas during wildfire season, Guarino said. "Where we have remote control capability, we disable reclosing based on a daily decision-making process during times of elevated risk. The company enabled 450 reclosing devices with remote capabilities in 2018 and is working to enable nearly 300 more in advance of the 2019 wildfire season. The reclosing devices will prevent automatic reconnection and thus prevent sparks that could start a fire."

Guarino did not sugar-coat the risk of fire in Orinda, noting that much of the area is rated as extremely high risk, being in tier three, although the urban core, or downtown Orinda, is rated only tier one. However, steps are being taken to protect the city. MOFD Chief Dave Winnaker received a grant to test sensors around the area (see related story on page A8). Guarino described these sensors as "rather innovative; the only ones around the state." He stressed that the latest technology is being used to provide early warning of wildfires, including real time monitoring and intelligence. PG&E has a Wildfire Safety Center, receiving information from 660 high-definition cameras and 1,300 new weather stations to be installed by 2022. PG&E is also supporting the installation of 24/7 Wildfire Safety Operations Center. On the website, the public can see what PG&E is seeing, he said.

In terms of vegetation management, Guarino noted that PG&E receives lots of calls and emails from Orinda. Historically, clearance from a line to vegetation was 18 inches. Now the actual requirement is 4 feet, but with some species, he said, "we have to clear 12 feet because they grow so fast."

Guarino also addressed the potential timing of any upcoming public safety power shutoffs. In order for there to be a shutoff, there are a number of conditions that must be present. It must be a red flag warning - last year there were some 60 such warnings, Guarino noted - but there must also be humidity of 20 percent or lower, there must be forecasted sustained winds generally above 25 miles per hour and gusts in excess of approximately 45 miles per hour, there must be dry fuel conditions on the ground with on the ground, real-time observations by PG&E personnel.

Having been contacted by Orinda City Council Member Amy Worth, Pacific Gas and Electric Company has found the money to respond to concerns regarding dead and dying trees near local power lines. In the past PG&E would trim such trees, but removal of the trees was the responsibility of the homeowner or the city upon whose property the tree was located. Now, PG&E says that they will remove such trees, and will haul away the debris left behind, such as the large piles of debris left behind McDonnell Nursery in Orinda.

"We'll take care of that too," said Tom Guarino from PG&E Public Affairs to Mayor Inga Miller and Worth, who raised the issue during a presentation by Guarino at the July 16 Orinda City Council meeting. According to Tamar Sarkissian, PG&E spokesperson, the new policies also apply to Lafayette and Moraga as well as other high fire threat areas. Crews of contractors have been actively

Guardino said that current technology can forecast four days out, which should allow ample notice for everyone. At a minimum, customers will receive notification of a shutoff two days in advance, then other notifications at 24 hours, two hours before, then notification that the outage has started. Later, customers will receive notifications regarding the restoration of power, which can take some time to accomplish. There was recently a shutoff in Oroville that lasted 12 hours, and it took an additional 12 hours to restore power. But if it is a severe outage, Guardino warned, restoration of power could take three to four days.

Many if not all of the most vulnerable citizens who are on dialysis or use oxygen are on a medical baseline billing program, Guardino said, which means that PG&E generally knows who they are. In the event of an emergency, he said, "if we don't reach them after multiple attempts, we'll go and knock on their door" and help to relocate them. So far Guardino stated that 500,000 people have updated their contact information.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District has also issued information about how it is preparing for public safety power shutoffs. According to EBMUD, outages are expected to last two days, but might be longer. A PSPS could force EBMUD to switch to backup generators and pumps to power pumping plants, water treatment plants, and other key facilities to keep water flowing, maintain storage and fire-fighting flow and to keep water distribution lines pressurized. When a red flag warning is issued, EBMUD will fill and maintain water tanks to near capacity. EBMUD is stationing portable generators and pumps at designated critical facilities to keep pumping plants running. They have made arrangements to keep the generators fueled during peak demand times.

EBMUD urges customers to update their contact information, and to keep at least two gallons of water per person per day stored, preparing for a shutoff of from three to seven days. EBMUD serves 1.4 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

For questions regarding PG&E's Community Wildfire Safety Program: Telephone: 1-866-743-6589; Email: wildfiresafety@pge.com; Website: www.pge.com/en_US/safety/emergency-preparedness/natural-disaster/wildfires/

wildfire-safety.page?WT.mc_id=Vanity_wildfiresafety

For more information about EBMUD's plans, visit ebmud.com/psps. For water emergencies call EBMUD Customer Service at 1-866-403-2683.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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