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Fire and fury experienced in Lamorinda

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Fire at Sanders Ranch in Moraga; lines for gas in Lafayette; shuttered shops in Orinda; refrigeration trucks at Whole Foods Market. Photos courtesy MOFD; J. Wake; Pippa Fisher; Sora O'Doherty

At the height of the incident, 150 firefighters fought the blaze, including five engines from the state Office of Emergency Services, a state strike team from the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and a Cal Fire crew from Humboldt County.

The fire burned down a hillside to the backyard of many of the homes on Merrill.

"The firefighters were waiting for it when it got there. There was a fire engine in practically every driveway," Rein said.

Rein praised the residents, who evacuated in the middle of the night despite no electric power, and headed to an evacuation center at St. Monica Church, which also had no power. "No whimpering or whining from anyone," Rein said.

By 7:30 that morning, most of the residents were back in their homes, except for the homes on Merrill, where fire engines remained to ensure containment, which occurred at 11:15 a.m.

No injuries were reported, no structures were damaged and the college was not threatened. Though the fire remains under investigation, Rein said that the fire was definitely not caused by PG&E power lines, as the lines are underground in that area, and the utility had cut off power to Moraga earlier that evening as part of its PSPS program.

Communication regarding the PG&E outages had begun earlier in the week, with the initial information stating power shutoffs would begin at midnight on Oct. 9, causing some city offices to close, council meetings to be canceled, and local churches and schools to cancel community events. Mauro Cazarez, owner of Baja Cali in Orinda, said that he was closed on Oct. 9 because he was told there would be no power at midnight, then at noon that day. If he cooked, he would not have been able to serve lunch, he said. The restaurant was closed with no power on Oct. 10. Cazarez said he

In an effort to reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire event, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company Public Safety Power Shutoff left millions of people without power across 35 counties in Northern and Central California last week, beginning in the Lamorinda area at 11 p.m. on Oct. 9.

Not long after power was cut, a 50-acre vegetation fire in the Moraga hills caused the evacuation of 140 homes in Sanders Ranch early in the morning of Oct. 10. The fire, reported at 12:54 a.m., burned 50 acres near Merrill Circle North and Sanders Ranch Road, south of Saint Mary's College.

"Because of the PG&E power shutoff, we had resources already staged," said Dennis Rein, spokesman for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. "We were as prepared as we could have been." Due to adverse weather conditions forecast, fire agencies predeployed extra resources in order to respond to potential catastrophic wildfires.

was trying to transfer some food to his father's restaurant in Hercules because he was told by his insurance company that he would not be reimbursed for food loss since he "had notice." He said he could possibly get something for loss of business, but he wasn't sure of that.

Many local residents heeded the call on Oct. 8 to fill gas tanks, causing long lines as folks queued up for gas at the Chevron station on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Lines at the Moraga Safeway for ice were long as well, as customers purchased supplies due to information from PG&E stating that the potential outage could last from two to five days. Three refrigeration trucks were parked outside Whole Foods Market in Lafayette Oct. 10 to keep food from spoiling, and generators were used to keep doors open at the Lafayette Trader Joe's and Diablo Foods.

The city of Orinda operated a PSPS Resources Center, where citizens could power their devices, stay cool, and avail of hot and cold drinks. Cindy Powell of the Orinda Association provided a microwave oven so that people could heat up food. City of Orinda Facilities and Parks Supervisor Steve Ehrhardt was happy that The Guzzler was on site Thursday evening for the food truck event. John Holtzer of Steel Smokin BBQ food truck said they didn't have a problem with power because they run on a generator; however, without internet, they could not accept credit card payments.

Lafayette resident Marilyn Finn, 81, cooked meat from her freezer, and returned it to freeze, and made plans to ensure her food did not spoil once the power went out. Since she is hard of hearing and uses a CPAP machine at night to treat sleep apnea, she was frustrated with the confusing information coming from PG&E since she needs electricity to operate the machine as well as devices designed to help alert her in emergencies due to her hearing loss. Her frustration was shared by many other Lamorinda residents, who vociferously expressed their displeasure with PG&E on social media prior to the shutdown.

Lafayette City Council Member Cam Burks said in an Oct. 11 social media post that his "primary concern over these past few days has been the public safety of our community. Lafayette Police and city staff/leadership have done a superb job. However, Pacific Gas and Electric Company negligence has cost our city major tax dollars, placing our residents at risk, and impacting our public education, transportation systems and local businesses."

Gov. Gavin Newsom blasted PG&E for the planned outage, saying at an Oct. 10 press conference, "What has occurred in the last 48 hours is due to decades of neglect. We should not accept the false choice between public safety and hardship." He made sure to compliment Cal Fire and local fire agencies, noting that the Moraga fire benefited from prepositioning of assets.

PG&E President and CEO Bill Johnson, when asked at a subsequent press conference if this is the new normal, said, "The goal is to reduce wildfire risks and prevent catastrophic events like we had in the past two years." In the days before the planned outage, PG&E call centers were overwhelmed and its website crashed. "We were not adequately prepared for this event," Johnson noted, "and this needs to improve in the future."

Finn said she plans to sign up for Nixle (nixle.com), which provides information from local public safety departments about important events.



Orinda PSPS Resource Center Photo Sora O'Doherty



Empty parking lot at La Fiesta Sqare in Lafayette Photo John Fernbacher

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