



Supervisors oppose SDG&E's shutoff plan

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San Diego County Board of Supervisors has directed the Chief Administrative Officer Walt F. Ekard to draft a letter to the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC) opposing San Diego Gas & Electric's plan to shut off power to as many as 60,000 customers during high-risk fire weather. Areas of Ramona would be affected by the plan.

The opposition to SDG&E's plan was unanimous among the five supervisors, although Ron Roberts had to leave the meeting prior to the vote and the official vote was 4-0 in favor of the motion.

"The risks to lives and property are far greater with the power off than on," said board Chair and District 2 Supervisor Dianne Jacob.

Roberts favors the concept of a cutoff plan to prevent fires caused by downed or arced power lines in high winds but believes such a decision should be made by the emergency response team.

"I don't think that SDG&E unilaterally should be implementing that," he said.

Supervisor Greg Cox is also amenable to a cutoff plan with proper decision-making.

"There may be circumstances where this makes sense," he said.

SDG&E has asked the PUC to review a plan to cut power to customers during high-risk fire weather. Several criteria would need to be met: a "red flag" fire warning from the National Weather Service, sustained winds of at least 35 mph or sustained winds of at least 30 mph with gusts of at least 55 mph, a humidity level under 20 percent, and moisture levels below 6 percent for dry brush and 75 percent for live plants.

"We would only shut off power during extreme conditions," said J.C. Thomas of SDG&E.

"Turning off power is not something we take lightly," Thomas said. "We believe it can help prevent another catastrophic fire in our region."

SDG&E has also requested that the County of San Diego enter into a formal Memorandum of Understanding with the utility to delineate responsibilities in the event of a "proactive" shutoff.

"It is a radical plan and it's never been done anywhere in the state," Jacob said.

Jacob noted that she was willing to support the plan if it had the support of the affected communities.

"The key stakeholders are not on board," she said.

The shutoff would cut electricity to pumps needed to provide water to customers, including fire departments. Ramona Municipal Water District (RMWD), Fallbrook Public Utility District (FPUD), Padre Dam Municipal Water District, Rainbow Municipal Water District, Valley Center Municipal Water District, and Yuima Municipal Water District formally protested the plan.

"SDG&E will create actual emergencies," said Jennifer Haley, legal counsel on the proposed SDG&E action for FPUD and Padre Dam. "Our customers will be without water at the hottest and driest time of the year."

Valley Center Municipal Water District general manager Gary Arant noted that fire departments often use water to fight fires outside the service area of the department's water district.

"This is an ill-conceived plan," he said. "The terrain of the rural areas requires that we use pumps to move water."

RMWD counsel Sophie Akins read a letter from RMWD General Manager Ralph McIntosh stating the district's opposition to the plan.

"If you go in and cut off power to water pumps in the backcountry, you're going to be unable to fight fires," said Supervisor Pam Slater-Price.

Jacob also noted that a power shutoff would hinder evacuation efforts. Residents would be evacuating in the dark, and the Reverse 911 emergency notification system might not work.

Electric garage door openers might not operate during a shutoff, and traffic signals would not function during an evacuation.

Jacob also noted that gas pumps would not be working just prior to an evacuation notice.

"Evacuees unable to fill their fuel tanks present risks," she said.

Law enforcement and other public safety resources would also be diverted due to the power outages. Cell phone sites would become inoperable, and residents would be unable to learn about their situation through Internet service or television, communications issues causing AT&T and Cox Communications to oppose the plan.

"It really puts a lot of people at risk," said Supervisor Bill Horn. "In a disaster like this, communication's one of

the best ways of saving lives.”

The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) also registered opposition to the plan on the grounds that school sites will not be able to meet applicable health and safety requirements.

“The plan imposes severe risks on affected schoolchildren and teachers,” said Jim Esterbrooks, SDCOE public information officer.

Esterbrooks told the supervisors that, without backup power, school sites would be cut off from the outside world and would be unable to contact emergency service providers as well as be unable to receive evacuation warnings. Esterbrooks noted that the shutoffs or shutoff threats would cause children to be kept home from school, depriving the schools of their Average Daily Attendance funding.

The loss of water and air conditioning are a matter of comfort for many people but a matter of health for seniors, infants, and others. An outage would deactivate medical equipment.

“Our patients are on dialysis. They’re on insulin. That means refrigeration,” said Judith Shaplin of Mountain Health and Community Service.

Shaplin also noted that the Conditions that would trigger a shutoff would exceed the duration of a normal outage, said Shaplin. “It could last for a week.”

The threat of a prolonged outage would likely cause many residents to utilize backup generators. Boulevard Community Planning Group Chair Donna Tisdale noted that the fuel storage for those generators and the ignition when the generators are activated also pose fire risks.

“This is actually a third-world approach,” Blossom Valley resident and former Lakeside Community Planning Group Chair Gordon Shackelford said of a plan which would force citizens to resort to individual systems.

Thomas noted that all five conditions, four of which are measured criteria and the other declared by the National Weather Service, would need to be met before the shutoff would be implemented.

“As a region we have to do something,” he said. “We have to make changes to reduce the potential for another catastrophe.”

While the SDG&E transmission and distribution lines are designed to withstand winds of up to 54 mph, Thomas noted that winds of lesser speeds can blow tree branches into power lines and that the sparks from arcing can ignite dry vegetation.

Patsy Fritz of Pauma Valley supported the cutoff plan.

“It’s about preparedness,” she said. “We’re not talking crisis control. We’re talking catastrophe control.”

Tisdale noted that high winds are normal in many mountain communities.

“I know it’s going to be much more frequent than they claim,” she said of the proposed shutoffs.

A generator required to pump well water from the depths many backcountry residents utilize could cost more than \$15,000, said Tisdale, noting that much of the backcountry is dependent upon groundwater.

“Most of that’s outside the County Water Authority, so people need wells,” she said.

“This plan to shut off power at a time when people need it the most is irresponsible,” said Milton Cyphert of Lakeside, who lost his home in the October 2003 Cedar Fire.

“This is a matter of life and death for many people,” Tisdale said.

“There may be a plan out there. This is not the plan,” said Ramona resident Diane Conklin, who represented the Mussey Grade Road Alliance.

Horn noted that in some recent fires the conditions triggering the shutdown would have occurred after the initial outbreak of the fires—and during the evacuation process.

“I think this is ill-advised,” he said. “It adds to the disaster rather than helps us.”

“I think there’s a lot more questions than there are answers,” Cox said of the SDG&E plan.

“The security of the population is so important here,” Horn said.