



Published July 10th, 2019

Fire districts prepare for PG&E planned power shutoffs

By Nick Marnell

As they are for any hazard, the Lamorinda fire agencies are prepared for the Pacific Gas and Electric Company Public Safety Power Shutoffs that the utility may implement in extreme fire danger this summer and fall.

"We don't consider the shutoffs any different from any other emergency," said Aaron McAlister, deputy fire chief of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. "We prepare at multiple levels for all risks. Earthquakes, flooding, mudslides. We constantly challenge ourselves."

McAlister said that the district has responded to active shooter scenarios by changing some of its equipment and outfitting employees with ballistic material. To confront catastrophic fires, ConFire has upped its level of preparedness, including the predeployment of resources during high fire danger and the addition of new equipment, like bulldozers.

For the PG&E shutdowns, the deputy chief said that the operation of the fire station generators has been evaluated, as has the availability of the contractor who supplies fuel for the generators. A new plug-and-play generator is coming to Lafayette Fire Station 17, which went dark during a PG&E outage in mid-June.

McAlister said that Fire Station 16 will have a state-of-the-art generator when it opens in August. "The generators in the class that we are talking about are designed to run around the clock, in that type of environment," Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker said.

The communications center, which dispatches calls for both Lamorinda fire districts, also must be supplied with fuel, and food delivered to the dispatchers. ConFire has satellite backup for cell coverage, as well as backup radio ability. "But the first thing we do is get the engines out of the apparatus bay, onto the ramps," McAlister said.

Both districts expect a spike in emergency medical calls and ambulance transports during a power shutoff, especially as the outage lingers. Again, the agencies look at the shutoffs as any other emergency, and as calls come in, they will respond. Winnacker said of one of the tools at his disposal is the ability to upstaff to meet demand.

McAlister called the sharing of information the most critical component of the planned outages, especially the location of the shutdown. "Don't tell me you're going to shut down 500 customers in Lafayette," he said of PG&E. "Give the fire district a map. Is it downtown? Is it St. Mary's Road?"

Though the fire districts have handled emergencies of all types, the PG&E power shutoffs may pose challenges not yet considered. "We're gathering information," McAlister said, such as ambulance transport data from North Bay counties that experienced a power shutdown in June. "It's a new program and we're wrapping our arms around it."

"Our regulators agree that this program can be effective," Tom Guarino of PG&E said.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA