



Published August 16th, 2023

Residents face unannounced power outages amid new PG&E fast trip program

By Jennifer Wake

Local residents, especially those who live in the Campolindo area of Moraga and central Lafayette, have been hit with a series of unexplained power outages lasting anywhere from 4 to 8 hours over the last nine months. Karen Hawkins, who lives in central Lafayette, noted power has been out seven times since July 13. "The same area comprised of approximately 2,000 homes seems to be consistently impacted. We understand that power will go out from time to time when living in a wooded area, yet this volume of outages is really not OK," she wrote in a letter to Lamorinda Weekly.

Hawkins was advised of a new type of system PG&E had rolled out, called Enhanced Powerline Safety Settings (EPPS) which are designed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires by automatically de-energizing powerlines struck by foreign objects. Yet, a supervisor at PG&E told Hawkins that the four EPSS shut-offs in late 2022 were all caused by PG&E equipment issues rather than something hitting the lines. "He read off the specific equipment failures - transformer, caliper, etc. He said that there are no reasons provided for the seven outages this year. Only one of the seven outages happened in moderately windy conditions, and we've had many windy evenings when the power was not impacted."

During a March 17 workshop, the California Public Utilities Commission discussed newly emergent concerns of investor-owned utilities' electrical system reliability, focusing on utility fast trip programs, including PG&E's EPPS program.

PG&E first implemented a pilot version of its EPSS program in 2021 across 11,500 miles of distribution circuits in High Fire Threat Districts (HFTD), according to information provided by the CPUC at the workshop. "In 2022, PG&E expanded the scope of its EPSS program to cover all circuits in the HFTD and select HFTD-adjacent areas," CPUC workshop information noted.

The CPUC's Safety and Enforcement Division is gathering information for the PG&E EPSS program and will conduct oversight of the EPSS program through monthly reporting by PG&E and monthly meetings with PG&E in order to ensure PG&E is analyzing trends and prioritizing system hardening to mitigate the impacts of EPSS.

A petition is being circulated by residents that will be submitted to the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) as a complaint, which can be found at <https://forms.gle/BnC3cT4SAdHYpR458>.

For more information about PG&E's EPPS program, or to view the workshop online, visit:

www.cpuc.ca.gov/industries-and-topics/wildfires/protective-equipment-device-settings

PG&E is planning to host an in-person meeting on Aug. 22 at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Center for Lamorinda customers impacted by the recent outages, according to the city of Lafayette. More information will be available at <https://www.lovelafayette.org/city-hall/quick-links/hot-topics/power-outages>

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[back](#)

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