

# Compare and contrast

**Is San Diego's power utility light-years ahead of PG&E in terms of safety?**

**As Pacific Gas & Electric Co. continues power shut-downs in Northern California due to high winds and fire danger, its management of the crisis has been widely criticized.**

Earlier this month, PG&E cut power to more than 700,000 customers. At the time, politicians and pundits pointed to San Diego Gas & Electric, which shut off electricity to about 500 customers, as a better example of wildfire preparedness.

But local critics argue SDG&E should not be put on a pedestal so quickly and the comparison is not equal.

"Are they better than the utilities in the north? Yeah, probably," said Dianne Jacob, a San Diego County supervisor and longtime critic of SDG&E. "But does that mean that they are the gold standard? Absolutely not."

Jacob said the utility made changes too late—only after power lines started

## About this story:

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catastrophic fires in 2007 that burned hundreds of homes and killed two people. That same year, SDG&E began using "public safety power shut-offs" as one mitigation tool. Now shut-offs have become the new

normal across California with increased wind and wildfire danger.

At a recent hearing of the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), PG&E CEO Bill Johnson said planned power outages could occur for the next 10 years to mitigate wind and fire dangers.

Since 2013, 52,000 SDG&E customers have lost power, a fraction of the more than 700,000 PG&E customers impacted in one shut-off earlier this month. That difference in the size of the shut-offs led the CPUC to blast PG&E, asking why it couldn't be more



**PG&E monitors conditions for potential wildfires in Northern California from a command center in San Francisco.**  
PHOTO COURTESY OF PG&E

like its sister utility to the south. In a letter, the CPUC demanded substantial changes from PG&E, including that the utility enhance efforts to minimize the size of future events.

That is a priority for SDG&E's meteorologists working in the utility's operations center.

Ahead of a recent weekend of increased fire risk, Brian D'Agostino, SDG&E's director of fire science and climate adaptation, was preparing to lead a team of meteorologists who would monitor the hot and dry air with strong Santa Ana winds.

D'Agostino stood in front of five giant monitors showing live mountaintop cameras and yellow, blue and red lines representing the utility's power lines.

"A major change from 10 years ago is we can see those days coming," he said. "All of these tools analyze all of the historical data and tell us when we're going to have that type of day that can result in a catastrophic fire."

A SDG&E spokesperson said the utility has spent more than \$1.5 billion in the past decade on wildfire preparedness. According

to D'Agostino, that includes an overhaul of its grid to minimize large-scale power shut-offs. Now if they shut down one line, they can still get power to areas through another route.

The design of PG&E's transmission and distribution network makes that much more difficult, said Michael Wara, the director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program at Stanford University.

SDG&E is rolling out new technology all the time, including moving power lines underground and creating smaller grids so they can turn off power in neighborhoods or even individual households with the highest fire risk, D'Agostino said.

All of this requires data, which SDG&E collects from 190 weather stations spread across the region. PG&E also utilizes weather stations—according to spokeswoman Tracy Lopez, they added 200 in 2018, and 200 more so far in 2019. The plan is to have 600 total

weather stations by the end of this year. But because most of these stations have been set up so recently, Wara said the utility doesn't yet have all the data it needs.

But is it fair to compare SDG&E and PG&E? Yes and no, said Wara.

It's unfair for a few reasons: San Diego's utility serves a quarter of the number of PG&E customers over a far smaller area and its terrain is less challenging to manage. SDG&E covers 4,100 square miles in San Diego and southern Orange counties. PG&E, meanwhile, covers about 70,000 square miles in northern and central California.

Also, PG&E's territory involves far more trees that need to be managed, Wara said. And the fire-prone areas where the northern utility might want to cut power are far more densely populated than San Diego's eastern county.

But in other ways, the comparison is fair, he said. After SDG&E began making major changes in the wake of the 2007 fires, PG&E should have better followed their example, he said.

"Twelve years ago SDG&E said utility-caused wildfire is not acceptable, and we need to do something about it. So they developed a whole program of activities to really reduce the risk," Wara said. "They're not done, but they have a process where they're always trying to improve, where there's no end to their efforts for risk reduction."

He said PG&E also could have acted at that time, but didn't.

PG&E spokeswoman Lopez counters that the utility has acted to mitigate fire risk, and points to the current public safety power shut-off event as an example of how they are doing that.

But, according to Wara, PG&E "didn't say we should be doing the things San Diego is doing, because that could happen to us."

Now, PG&E is playing catch-up, and will not be able to improve its grid to minimize power shut-offs anytime soon, he said.

"It's a seven- to 10-year problem," Wara said. "In the meantime, PG&E can improve how it communicates with its customers about the shut-offs."

—CLAIRE TRAGESER

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