

# GEORGE LOPEZ

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## PG&E CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

by phone from her San Lorenzo Valley home in Santa Cruz County.

“We’re trying to get PG&E to focus primarily on upgrading its infrastructure in high wildfire threat areas so there will be fewer fires. They keep having fires because they’re depending on cutting down trees to do the job; it’s not.”

After an audit last spring in which the CPUC found that PG&E was focusing primarily on trimming trees that were not in high-fire-risk areas, regulators reprimanded the utility for not doing enough to maintain its grid in order to prevent forest fires. In a separate report, the CPUC’s Public Advocates Office called into question PG&E’s tree-trimming methods, as well, and also criticized the company for moving slowly on grid improvements and for focusing on lower-risk areas.

Moreno said PG&E is ramping up the upgrades, “but it takes time to be able to get the resources and human resources to work toward that goal.... We have tens of thousands of miles of power lines, so this work cannot be done just in a year.” He said the utility’s rebuild work in Paradise—“like for like” but with insulated wiring and stronger poles—was hindered initially due to limited materials. PG&E decided in May 2019 to fully underground the town’s lines, and Moreno said the company is “on track to complete that within four or five years from now.”

After visiting the Dixie Fire’s point of origin, gazing down the row of vegetation-managed poles, McCollum said he’s certain upgraded infrastructure could have prevented the weeks-long devastation. Had the tree fallen into insulated instead of bare wires, no “stray current” would have traveled from wire to wire or by wire to the

On July 28, PG&E delivered images to a federal judge of a tree leaning against a power line (below, left) as well as the remains of its scorched trunk (right) that was found at the point of origin of the Dixie Fire, currently the second largest wildfire in California history.

PHOTOS: FEDERAL COURT, NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA



The 2018 Camp Fire, the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history, was caused by a PG&E high-voltage line that busted out of a faulty steel C-hook.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BUTTE COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY’S OFFICE

ground.

“There would have been no short circuit; no problem,” he said. Current-interruption technology would have detected the line break and immediately cut the power flow remotely, thereby eliminating another opportunity for sparking—not to mention the potential of an expulsion fuse blowing (which in this instance has not been found to be the case).

“Looking at 100 million trees and trying to pick the three or four out of there that are going to cause a problem is not the way to go,” McCollum said. “They need a fire-proof system, consisting of insulated wires [and] circuit protection—and a ready response when something happens.” □

Jason Cassidy contributed to this report.

