

'We need the food that we lost'

Poor families still reeling from blackouts

BY JACKIE BOTTS / CalMatters

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. turned off power to

Ana Patricia Rios' neighborhood in Sonoma County for eight days in October, three at the beginning of the month and five near the end. The mother of three young boys watched twice as nearly all of the food in her refrigerator spoiled. She threw out at least \$500 worth of meat, fruit, vegetables, salsas and other food that would have supplied her family with months of meals.

"It's a big impact because we need the food that we lost," Rios said in Spanish, two days after the lights finally came back on. "Even if the electricity doesn't arrive, the bills do."

Similar losses occurred throughout Rios' wooded, hilly neighborhood, which is mostly home to Hispanic families. Many are vineyard and hospitality workers, and sometimes several families share a house.

Across California, low-income households like the Rios family faced hunger and financial crisis as the food in their refrigerators spoiled during October's unprecedented, deliberate blackouts. Utility companies shut down the power in certain fire-prone communities during windy, dry conditions to reduce the risk of an electric line sparking a fire.

An inconvenience for many, losing hundreds of dollars of food was an economic disaster for others.

While many of the areas that lost power, such as parts of Marin County and Napa Valley, tend to be wealthier than the rest of the state, tens of thousands of the affected households live on extremely tight budgets, according to a CalMatters analysis of census tracts touched by PG&E's power outage that began on Oct. 26 and in some cases lasted through Oct. 31.

CalMatters' analysis found that one in 10 residents and one in eight children in the affected census tracts live below the federal poverty level, which is \$25,750 of annual income for a family of four. The estimates are based on PG&E's maps of the approximate areas affected by the shutoffs and averaged data from the 2013 through 2017 annual American Community Survey conducted by the Census Bureau.

Several very poor communities lost power. In some of the sections of Vallejo, San Pablo, Berkeley, San Rafael, Santa Cruz, Clearlake, Redding, Arcata and Sonora where the lights went out, more than a third of the people live in poverty.

In some cases, people who were unable to replace their spoiled food faced immediate hunger. Many relied on local food banks, some of which

lost their own power and had to throw out their food. Some schools had to shut down, so families like the Rios had to feed children who usually eat free and reduced-price school meals. And many scrambled to pull together the November rent while also refilling their fridges. The elderly, ill and disabled struggled the most.

"The shutoffs not only taxed our network but deepened hunger among those already food insecure," Andrew Cheyne, director of government affairs at the California Association of Food Banks, said in a Senate committee hearing on Nov. 18. "We cannot be there for everyone in need, and Californians are not refilling those refrigerators."

As wildfire risk persists, how utility companies will protect low-income customers from hunger and financial crisis is an open question.

Gov. Gavin Newsom called the planned outages "unacceptable."

"We cannot continue to incur the economic losses, the potential health and human costs associated with these power shutoffs," Newsom told CalMatters.

Bowing to a demand from Newsom, PG&E agreed to provide a one-time rebate of \$100 for households and \$250 for businesses affected by the first wave of outages that begin Oct. 9, plunging roughly 738,000 customers into darkness with limited notice and bungled communications.

Sen. Scott Wiener, a San Francisco Democrat, has introduced a bill that would require utilities to reimburse customers for the costs they accrued during planned outages.

On Nov. 17, PG&E announced it would donate \$2 million to nonprofits that provide food, water, shelter and other services to "low-income children and families, communities of color, seniors and Tribal members" during disasters and planned outages.

"For the most vulnerable among us, those who depend on life sustaining medical equipment or cannot afford to replace lost food, losing power for an extended period can come with considerable fear and safety risks," said PG&E CEO and President Bill Johnson in prepared remarks at the Nov. 18 hearing.

CalMatters is a nonprofit, nonpartisan media venture explaining California policies and politics. This article is part of *The California Divide*, a collaboration among newsrooms examining income inequity and economic survival in California. An unabridged version of this story is available at newsreview. com/sacramento.







