

## **Not My Fault: Planning for the ShakeOut ... and the unexpected**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
Posted October 10, 2019

I had this column pretty well planned out on Monday. We have lots of ShakeOut activities going on and that was to be the emphasis. I'll still get to ShakeOut, but first the unexpected. As I write, we are 12 hours into a PG&E power outage that is affecting almost everyone in Humboldt County. Red Flag Fire Warnings are in place for inland areas and the power to the transmission lines that parallel Highways 299 and 36 have been shut off as a precaution.

I am just beginning to get a flavor for the impact. Beyond the simple problem of having no power at home, there is a huge ripple effect. Some schools and businesses are closed and it's difficult to know which is which. Internet services are down or patchy. Traffic signals are either off or functioning only in an emergency mode (blinking red lights – 4-way stops). This outage is expected to last at least 36 hours and perhaps longer when factoring in the time to assess the condition of the lines before turning the switches back on.

It's a bit like having an earthquake but with only one utility affected and no damage. As frustrating as it is, think of it as a forced test of our emergency planning. Personally, I learned that although I have plenty of food stored, I didn't think it out very well. Two weeks worth of canned beans and Clif Bars may provide adequate sustenance, but are not much fun to eat. We have a land line at home, but for the life of me I can't find our plug-in non-wireless phone set or our portable radio. I have plenty of batteries but they aren't much use if I can't find the radio.

The community lesson that jumps out is communication and planning. PG&E did a really poor job of educating the community as to what impacts to expect. There is a difference between information and education. I get that this particular wind event developed quickly and by Sunday and Monday there was a possibility of a shutdown. And I had seen mention of the possibility of shutdowns as a mitigation tactic during this fire season some time ago. But I saw no campaign to inform me of how to prepare, what actions to take beforehand and

how to get updates. They should have been running PSAs about the outages for months.

Communication between PG&E and the counties didn't improve as the weather flags began to wave. The possibility of a shutdown was pretty much tamped down by Monday afternoon until Tuesday morning when suddenly it became a sure thing. This gave counties very little time to get in front of the curve in terms of both communicating with the public and their own planning. Most frustrating to me was how hard I found it to get good information. I'm pretty dialed in to the response community and if I find it difficult to be informed, I expect most of you are having problems as well. And once the power went out, the PG&E website was totally incapacitated from overuse.

Which brings me back to one of my favorite themes. In times of emergency, our local radio stations become lifelines and the most accessible way to get information. A big thank you to KHUM, KSLG, KGOE, KINS, KEKA and KMUD for keeping us informed. Last year I would have put KHSU on this list but sadly, our regional public radio station no longer serves the regional public in times of emergency. I hope the new campus administration makes it a priority to return local programming and staff to the station.

So far, this outage has been an inconvenience, but for me not a life threatening experience. We are getting a pretty clear picture of how disruptive losing electricity can be. But most of us still have water, can flush the toilets, and have cell service, albeit a bit slow. October 17th is the Great ShakeOut. This is the time of year to focus on preparing for an earthquake here. One that will not only knock out power but impact all of our infrastructure and cause structural damage and injuries as well.

ShakeOut features a Drop, Cover and Hold On Drill. DROP to the ground when the shaking starts and stay in one spot. Use your arm to COVER your neck and head. If there is a table or desk nearby, slide under it and HOLD ON to the leg so that you move with it. A little planning ahead of time can make a big difference. Move that enormous potted plant on top of the bookshelf right next to your bed, or any other large objects that could fall on you.

On the North Coast, add evacuation to your drill if you live or work in a tsunami zone. If it were a real earthquake, the shaking would be your signal to head to higher ground or inland. Check out the tsunami maps at [rctwg.humboldt.edu](http://rctwg.humboldt.edu) to find out if you are in the zone.

On Saturday, an evacuation drill is planned for the residents of Fields Landing. At 10 am, the Fields Landing tsunami siren will emit one short blast (if the power has been restored) to signal the beginning of the drill. Just remember that in the drill, the siren is masquerading as ground shaking – after a real earthquake, the sirens are unlikely to function.

Please register to participate as an individual, family, business or other organization at [shakeout.org](http://shakeout.org). Surviving the earthquake is just the first step. Use your experiences from this outage to think about what you need to both survive and be comfortable in the next real disaster. Make an emergency plan or develop a new one, get supplies, and talk to your co-workers, family and loved ones.

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Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine “Living on Shaky Ground”? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email [Kamome@humboldt.edu](mailto:Kamome@humboldt.edu)

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