

## **Not My Fault: PG&E blackout version 2.0, plenty to improve on**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
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Not quite déjà vu all over again. This week's Pacific Gas and Electric Company PSPS (Public Safety Power Shutoff) had similarities and differences to the first one in early October. The biggest similarity — no power. But it was longer, nearly 40 hours at my house. And like version one, it created confusion, discomfort and a significant economic hit on our community.

We did have more advance warning and most people and businesses took advantage of the time to better prepare. Gas tanks were filled without the long lines and anxiety of the first blackout and, like me, I expect most of you did a better job of storing food, batteries and other supplies. Community service centers were established and some people were able to use them to charge electronics. But communication between PG&E, users and the county was, if anything, worse, and for many, it was even more difficult than the earlier round.

My assessment — a communication disaster. PG&E failed us in many more ways than just turning off the power. There was a failure to provide clear, consistent and actionable advice before the event. There was a failure to communicate during the event and now silence, as it appears to be over. And PG&E did a miserable job communicating with counties trying to respond to the hardships the blackout created.

First a disclaimer. My opinions are based on limited observations. My information is incomplete and I don't know all sides of this story. When I say PG&E, I am referring to the larger entity that orchestrated the blackout. I have worked closely with personnel at the Humboldt Bay PG&E facility and in the PG&E Seismic Risk group for years and consider them valued colleagues. They worked hard to develop the tsunami evacuation site at King Salmon, were partners in evacuation drills and have supported many research projects on the earthquake and tsunami hazards of the North Coast. I also have nothing but admiration for the hardworking PG&E workers who have been toiling long hours under difficult circumstances to restore power. It's that other more nebulous PG&E management I am pointing a finger at

here. One of the problems is that I don't really know who or where you are.

I have spent much of my career in communicating risk information. I don't consider myself an expert, but I have worked with many people who are and have learned much from them. There is nothing more important than communication when it comes to reducing the impacts of disaster on society. Knowing how to build strong structures, collecting good data and developing warning systems are important. But they are all essentially useless if you can't convey their importance, how they work and the responsibilities of individuals and organizations in terms that everyone can understand. This isn't "dumbing down" information. It's understanding the essential nub of what is important and being able to explain it.

Communication is a forever process. You don't start during an emergency or even a few days or weeks ahead of time. Preparedness is not the most exciting of subjects — until perhaps the lights go out or the ground starts shaking. Here is where government needs to take the lead. Some areas are straightforward like having and enforcing building codes so that structures don't collapse in strong shaking or supporting and testing weather/tsunami/flood-warning systems. Communication and education programs often get short shrift — some of the higher ups may think them unimportant or something that all of us should be able to figure out on our own. Whatever the reason, I disagree.

There are five essential pieces to good risk communication:

- what is the threat(s);
- how will I learn about it;
- what actions can I take (now and during) to make myself safe;
- how will I get updated information;
- what can I expect from local/state/federal government agencies during and after the event.

The PSPSs differ from natural and other disasters in one very important way. All disasters involve uncertainty, difficulty in assessing the situation and forecasting events in the near future. We've learned a lot about how best to do this. After the October 1991 Oakland Hills Fire (caused by the same conditions happening with the current fires), California instituted the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) in order to coordinate response, efficiently use resources and to communicate with one voice. The federal government adapted SEMS into NIMS (the National Incident Management System) in

2003. Counties are usually the primary unit in SEMS coordinating the response and information flow.

Counties during the blackout are still using SEMS in the response. But PG&E is calling the shots and pulling the plug, sending out information independently of the SEMS/county/state process. As a result, response agencies can only react and, just like us, try to puzzle out the meaning of what is happening. If nothing else happens as a result of the blackout debacle, we need legislation to require PG&E to fit into SEMS, make their decision-making process transparent and coordinate all information releases with the county. There is nothing more important during an emergency than speaking with one clear and understandable voice.

Take a lesson from the tsunami world. Tsunamis are rare events and, just like PSPSs, tsunami alerts can be confusing. Outreach and education is built into the tsunami warning system — that’s why the NWS has a dedicated position to communicating risk and preparedness and coordinating annual communication tests. Over the past two decades social scientists and users have worked hard to improve messaging. They still aren’t perfect but they do have several features that should be incorporated into any notification system: a headline sentence stating what the alert is about, an identifying number with time and date of the release, recommended actions, and when the next bulletin can be expected.

It’s a start — we can and must do better next time.

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Note: Humboldt County wants your feedback on the blackout. Go to

<https://humboldt.gov/FormCenter/Office-of-Emergency-Services-23/Damage-Report-20191026-PGE-Power-Shutoff-129?fbclid=IwAR0I7Xi1fEolr70O8QVFd2A-cxdFH-4IRKfVqV4cRy2Sp7Dxw6ag4pCas94>

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<https://www.times-standard.com/2019/10/30/lori-dengler-pge-blackout-version-2-0-plenty-to-improve-on/>