

At least 23 dead as reports point to electrical infrastructure as possible cause of California fires

By Kevin Martinez
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Officials have raised the death toll in one of the most destructive wildfires in California history to 23 people. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) Chief Ken Pimlott called the fires “a serious, critical, catastrophic event.” An estimated 8,000 firefighters are battling the blazes as fierce winds fan the flames that are devouring extra-dry vegetation.

Around 25,000 people have been evacuated from seven counties north of San Francisco and have set up in dozens of shelters. In Sonoma County alone, 5,000 people are taking refuge in 36 shelters according to officials. Many evacuees were unable to bring anything with them from their homes and have been told it may be weeks before they are able to return to check on what remains of their possessions.

The fires have left at least 180 people injured and have destroyed more than 3,500 homes and businesses. The number of dead and injured is expected to rise as emergency responders begin searching the wreckage of evacuated areas. Sonoma County officials said 670 people are still listed as missing from the fires in California wine country.

Exactly what caused the fires that have burned 170,000 acres since Sunday is not known. Cal Fire Chief Pimlott reported that the chance of a lightning strike sparking the fires was “minimal” and 95 percent of wildfires are started by people, intentionally or not.

However, as is the case with many “natural” disasters in the United States, such as the hurricanes which wreaked havoc over the last several months in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, the criminal neglect of infrastructure in the interest of profit is a likely factor in the unfolding catastrophe in Northern California.

Reports have emerged that emergency dispatchers in

Sonoma County received calls on Sunday night about multiple power lines falling and electrical transformers exploding.

According to a review of emergency radio traffic by the Bay Area News Group, Sonoma County dispatchers sent out fire crews to at least 10 different locations over a 90-minute period after receiving reports of sparking wires and other problems because of high winds.

Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), based in San Francisco, issued a statement acknowledging equipment troubles in the area but said questions about maintenance were “highly speculative.” As required by state law, the company must cut back trees from power lines to reduce the risk of lines being brought down by falling branches sparking fires. However, the company admitted in a statement that they found “wires down, broken poles and impacted infrastructure,” indicating that proper maintenance had not been carried out.

If PG&E were found to be responsible for the wildfires because of inadequate maintenance of power lines, it would not be the first time. Last April, the company was fined \$8.3 million by the state Public Utilities Commission for failing to maintain a power line which started the Butte fire in Amador County in September 2015. That fire raged for 22 days and killed two people, destroying 549 homes and burning 70,868 acres.

PG&E was found guilty of 739 counts of negligence and fined nearly \$30 million in 1994 for a fire near the town of Rough and Ready in Nevada County sparked by high voltage wires. State regulators found that the company had diverted almost \$80 million from tree-cutting programs into profits.

In 2010, PG&E’s failure to maintain its natural gas

lines led to the 2010 San Bruno explosion, which killed eight people and destroyed 38 homes. The company was fined \$1.6 billion and a federal jury last year convicted the company on five charges of violating federal pipeline safety regulations, and one charge of obstructing an official National Transportation Safety Board probe.

Last year, Cal Fire announced it would force PG&E to pay \$90 million in firefighting costs. In addition, more than 1,000 lawsuits relating to fires are pending against the company. However, these fines have amounted to little more than a slap on the wrist for a company which has seen annual profits surpass \$1 billion in recent years.

Many of those reported missing from the fires are presumed to be staying with somebody else and have not checked in as safe on the official registry for missing persons. Concerned family members and friends have used social media to search for loved ones who have been impacted by one of the 22 fires currently burning in Northern California.

The fires regained momentum on Wednesday pushing flames through hills and vineyards as officials scrambled to evacuate some 2,000 residences in the city of Calistoga in Napa County. Deputies in neighboring Sonoma County were “running toward the fire, banging on doors, getting people out of their house,” Misit Harris, a Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office spokeswoman reported. “It’s rapidly changing, it’s moving quickly, it’s a very fluid situation,” she said. “The fire is growing.”

The worst of the fires, the Tubbs fire, which burned down portions of the city of Santa Rosa, has already killed 11 people since it erupted on Sunday, making it the deadliest wildfire in the state in 14 years. Together with the Atlas fire in Napa County, they had torched a combined 70,000 acres by Wednesday morning, according to Cal Fire.

Daniel Berlant, assistant deputy director for Cal Fire said, “This has been one of the deadliest weeks for fires that we’ve experienced in recent time.” Evacuation orders remain in place for areas which have been burned and have already resulted in three arrests. Residents have been warned not to return for at least another week.

The past two days have seen fires engulf heavily populated neighborhoods prompting residents to flee in

the middle of the night having only minutes to grab their belongings.

Intense northern Diablo winds are expected to fuel and spread the wildfires until Thursday according to the National Weather Service. Firefighters have struggled in the face of the intense winds to contain the flames from threatening populated areas.

President Donald Trump responded to the disaster by approving inadequate federal emergency assistance to California, agreeing to an earlier request by Governor Jerry Brown. The assistance provides immediate funds for clearing debris and supplying evacuation centers.

For Governor Brown this will be the 10th time he has declared a state of emergency for wildfires this year alone. Already, 8 million acres have been burned as a result of almost 7,500 fires that have flared up across the state.

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