

Investigations point to energy corporation's negligence in California wildfire

By E.P. Milligan
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An investigation is now underway that will assess the culpability of Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) in starting the Camp Fire, now the deadliest wildfire in the history of California.

The company acknowledged Tuesday that it had submitted an “electric incident report” to the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) on November 8, moments before the wildfire broke out. The report detailed a power failure on a transmission line in Butte County at 6:15 a.m., 15 minutes before the fire was reported as starting in the same area.

More than 100 people are still listed as missing by the Butte County Sheriff's Office after the fire destroyed the town of Paradise, California Thursday morning. The official death toll stands at 56, while Butte County officials have said they expect more bodies will be found. One quarter of the population of Paradise, a town of 27,000, are senior citizens, and 73 of the missing persons are 65 years or older.

In a document filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission on Tuesday, PG&E stated that if its equipment was found responsible for starting the fire, the cost of the damage would exceed its insurance coverage and hurt its financial standing. The company's shares fell 21 percent on the following day. Its stock has fallen by 53 percent in total since the fire broke out.

Affected residents have filed a lawsuit against PG&E at the San Francisco Superior Court, accusing the company of negligence. “Rather than spend the money it obtains from customers for infrastructure maintenance and safety,” states the official complaint, “PG&E funnels this funding to boost its own corporate profits and compensation.”

Oakland attorney Michael Danko, representing the plaintiffs, claims to have “overwhelming” evidence

that PG&E is to blame. In addition to the incident report the company filed to the CPUC, Danko cites “witnesses who saw the fire start on a transmission line” as well as a resident who received an email from the utility a day before the fire broke out notifying her of sparking lines.

The total number of those killed in the Camp Fire may never be known. There are currently over 100 missing person reports from the fire, but those without close friends or family may never be reported. The destruction is so extensive that emergency responders will have a hard time finding all the victims. The Butte County Sheriff told reporters that in some cases “the fire burned so intensely” that the temperatures would “be high enough to completely consume the body.”

No wireless emergency alert was issued, and thousands of panicked residents clogged the roads trying to escape. The fire has burned a total of 138,000 acres. Officials say they expect that it will not be contained until the end of the month.

The Camp Fire is joined by the Woolsey and Hill fires in Southern California, which killed at least two people and forced over 260,000 to evacuate in Ventura and Los Angeles counties. These fires have either damaged or destroyed a combined total of more than 9,000 structures.

This year has been one of California's most destructive wildfire seasons on record, with 7,579 fires and counting, which have burned almost two million acres—the largest amount of burned acreage recorded in a fire season. At present, the fires have caused more than \$2.9 billion in damages.

Rising temperatures, extended dry seasons, high winds, and an increase in dead tree fuel have all helped to exacerbate the strength, speed and deadliness of the wildfires. However, it is now becoming clear that

unsafe practices by the major power companies, coupled with an overall decay of infrastructure in large parts of the state, have played a defining role.

In addition to PG&E's role in the Camp Fire, state regulators have also begun a probe into Southern California Edison (SCE) for its possible role in sparking the Woolsey Fire. SCE is a subsidiary of Edison International, a corporation with \$41.44 billion in total assets.

The CPUC has stated that the company's electrical infrastructure may have broken down near ground zero of the blaze. On Thursday, SCE issued an incident report to the CPUC alerting that a substation circuit near the fire's origin sent a "protective relay," a function designed to trip a circuit breaker in the event of a malfunction such as over-current or over-voltage. The notification was sent automatically just two minutes before the inferno began.

While the culpability of either utility is yet to be proven, it is widely known that energy companies throughout the US routinely employ cheap materials and unsafe practices in the interest of cost-cutting. The vast majority of power in the US is circulated through overhead, rather than underground, power lines.

Overhead lines, which are cheaper to build and maintain, are known to be a contributor to wildfires. According to data compiled by the *Texas Wildfire Mitigation Project*, overhead lines caused almost 4,000 wildfires in Texas over a three-and-a-half year period alone.

Under capitalism, utility providers are operated as privately-owned corporations run for profit. Basic safety measures—such as installing underground lines in areas particularly sensitive to wildfires—are ignored. At the same time, the public infrastructure designed to prevent such catastrophes, such as reliable emergency notification systems, first responders, evacuation coordinators, fire prevention programs and others are starved of badly needed funds.

If PG&E is found responsible for the fire, it may file for bankruptcy. According to *Bloomberg News*, a "bankruptcy filing could come down to a fight between bondholders who lent the company money and property owners whose homes were scorched by wildfires." In other words, just as in every major catastrophe in capitalist society, the victims are likely to never be made whole.

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