

BACKGROUND: **Energy Security** (Michael Potts)

Rural residents of Mendocino County expect electrical outages during intense winter storms, and now, under the regime of “Public Safety Power Outages” during times of high winds and elevated fire danger. Without electricity, for many, life simply STOPS. Point-of-Sale cash registers, credit card clearance machines, respirators, water pumps ... the list is long. Electricity has become, for many of us, as important a right as Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

“Mini-grids” or “Islands” are being planned for some essential centers of service – the Hospital and County building in Fort Bragg, for example, that is NOT included in the first round of funding – but we are a rural county, and for many of us travel during outages is problematic. State funding is being made available, and needs to be allocated in such a way that residents with special needs and businesses can have uninterrupted power sufficient, for example, for their health requirements or to stay in the business of providing goods and services to County residents.

EXAMPLE: During the “PSPS” in October, many stores in Mendocino and Fort Bragg were forced to close, because their money receiving capabilities were turned off. The owner of Evergreen Barn (Mendocino) experienced a business-threatening loss equal to a quarter of expected (and needed) monthly revenue. Her experience was by no means unique.

County Facilities

County points of presence – Sheriff’s stations, Courthouses, Department offices, Libraries, Schools – should, in outage times, be sources of essential charging for phones and life-sustaining equipment. Where no such facility exists within reasonable distance, identified public facilities – Caspar Community Center, Inglenook, Anderson Valley, and Whitesboro Grange Hall, Post offices, filling stations – should be provided with essential charging capability and staffing underwritten during daylight hours.

Acquisition & Maintenance

Electrical storage adequate to the baseline needs of businesses and health-at-risk residents is, over time, a manageable expense, but the start-up costs are beyond many. Electrical needs assessment, system design and implementation are available from in-County vendors at reasonable cost if State funding and County permitting can be made easily available. For businesses, payback periods are short, on the order of three years, if businesses can remain open during outages. For at-risk residents, the issue of payback is immaterial. (Electrical utilities are known to make *some* accommodation for health-at-risk customers.)

Larger businesses are able to afford sufficient generator and photovoltaic power to operate during outages. PSPSes unfairly discriminate against small businesses, of which our County has many that are vulnerable to the losses caused by deliberate outages.

Generators and electrical storage capability

Generators are not the answer in times of Climate Change. Aside from their danger, outsized contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, short lifetime, and expense to operate, a neighborhood of many generators is nightmarish during long outages.* Renewable sources, such as photovoltaic modules and alternative electrical systems are affordable, cost-effective, and long-lived. Paired with generators, they enable reasonably effective “Days of Autonomy” equal to anticipated PSPS lengths without abrogating residents’ rights to “the quiet enjoyment” of their property.

To avoid night-time generator use and unsafe siting and fuel management practices potentially leading to wildfires, the County should mandate generator permits, permissible times of use, and

safe fuel storage and refueling practices consistent with reduced GHG emissions, neighborhood safety, and quiet.

BACKGROUND: It is estimated by local generator vendors that up to 5% of all fuel purchased for generators ends up spilled during refueling due to improper training and handling. They furthermore asserts that intermittent use (a few times a year) of inexpensive, entry-level generators typically leads to premature failure or expensive repairs; the typical life of such generators is less than three years. This is an unsustainable expense.

During the October 2019 PSPSes, noise levels in proximity of even a single generator exceeded by a factor of two the permissible decibel level specified in the Mendocino County “quiet enjoyment” code.

Operation of generators under low-load conditions (such as night-time) is wasteful of fuel, and, due to inefficiencies in low-cost generators, increases GHG emissions. Pairing a generator with a battery bank and trimming night-time use intelligently makes silent operation possible.

Regulate Utility Actions

Critics of PG&E’s self-serving PSPS actions advise that in preparation for the 2019 Wildfire season, the Utility spent wildly on remote wind measurement equipment used to justify shutdowns, but failed to maintain brush and tree clearance on ridge tops and other wind-prone areas. This misfeasance, coupled with unworkable and inadequate notifications, over-long interruptions of service, overstated wind risks, and unsupportable assertions (“91 potential wildfires averted!” said one PG&E advisory) suggests that very little planning or forethought went into balancing the risk of wildfires against the cost to communities served.

PG&E claims that they will do better this year, and the presence of tree crews across the northern parts of California suggests that they may. We can only hope.

Sonoma Clean Power hopes to take over actual transmission and distribution in their service area, and we expect that, based here in our region, they will do so. Any impediments to their assumption of these roles in the delivery of electricity must be encouraged at the County level.

PSPS: is this a joke?

California utilities coined the phrase “Public Safety Power Shutoffs” in hopes that this framing would excuse their insensitive actions. It is incumbent on the County to remind the utilities that a condition of their franchise is *service* the interruption of which abrogates their agreement. The utilities may control distributed electricity, but the POWER belongs to the PEOPLE.

Last edited by

- Michael Potts, 9 March 2020

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