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NBC Bay Area News Story Dated 10-23-20 Regarding Kincade Fire Investigation



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KINCADE FIRE

Kincade Fire Tied to PG&E Failure to Decommission an Unneeded High-Voltage Line

By [Jaxon Van Derbeken](#) • Published October 22, 2020 • Updated on October 23, 2020 at 9:09 am



Firefighters battle the Kincade Fire as it burns a barn on October 27, 2019 in Santa Rosa, California. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Cal Fire blames the Kincade Fire – the largest in Sonoma County history – on PG&E’s failure to properly decommission a high voltage line that had once fed power to a shuttered geothermal plant, according to the findings of its final report obtained by NBC Bay Area.

Cal Fire went as far as recommending that PG&E be charged criminally with multiple felony counts for recklessly causing the fire, which started one year ago.

The wind-whipped inferno began at the base of a tower that once provided power to Calpine’s Fumarole 9-10 plant, northeast of the town of Geyserville.

It eventually consumed 77,000 acres, left four firefighters injured and leveled more than 300 structures, prompting the largest evacuation in county history.

Cal Fire said the fire would not have happened, however, had the company properly decommissioned the power line feeding that shuttered plant, either by removing or de-energizing

it.



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PG&E said it is still investigating the fire and had not seen Cal Fire's findings. But earlier this year, then CEO Bill Johnson told regulators that the tower tied to the fire had passed multiple inspections with nothing out of the ordinary.

"Sometimes things just break," he said.

But one former regulator, who learned of Cal Fire's conclusions from NBC Bay Area's Investigative Unit, flatly rejected the notion that the Kincade fire was an unforeseeable mishap.

"What you're describing here with the Kincade fire is not an accident – it is a product of a longstanding pattern," said former state utilities commissioner, Catherine Sandoval, an attorney who has made filings to the judge overseeing PG&E's probation in the case stemming from the 2010 San Bruno gas explosion.

"There needs to be a serious look at the organization and why this organization keeps producing the same kinds of problems over and over again."

According to the report, the geothermal plant was partly shutdown in 2001, and at that time, rather than taking down the line that served it, PG&E left it in place on the tower, still carrying power. The plant was fully shut down by 2006.

When PG&E crews went to decommission the line in 2001, Cal Fire found they disconnected the wire from a clamp on the tower that was designed to secure the line and keep it taut in high winds.

Cal Fire said the now loose line was left unsecured for more than a decade and suffered "low

cycle fatigue” from twisting and bending in high winds.

It was under high winds on the night of Oct. 23, 2019 that the line finally snapped and dangled onto the tower. Cal Fire’s report estimated the dangling line hit the tower more than a dozen times, each time showering sparks and molten metal on the dry brush below.

The company’s failure to fully and properly decommission the line, either by deenergizing or removing it, Cal Fire concluded, was the root cause of the fire.

Cal Fire noted that PG&E was alerted to the problem of wind driven wear in 2016 when it was blamed for the Sawmill fire near the location where the Kincade fire broke out. The earlier fire, Cal Fire said, should have led PG&E to look for vulnerabilities “to eliminate future failures with equipment exposed to similar conditions.”

But that was not the only warning. Sandoval pointed to the Camp Fire in 2018 as another blaze sparked by wind driven wear over time. In that fire, a worn C-hook holding part of the line to the tower snapped after decades in service, according to Cal Fire.

Sandoval said the Kincade fire a year later is yet another product of the company failing to track problems and deal with them preventatively.

“It’s not just sloppy, it’s wrong,” she said. “The question becomes in legal terms, is it actually criminally negligent? Is it actually reckless?”

Sonoma County prosecutors have not announced whether they will seek the charges urged by Cal Fire in the report.

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