

# Wildfire Shutoffs Are Now a Utility Leadership Test

For U.S. power companies, wildfire season is no longer a regional operating problem that a few Western utilities can manage on the margins. It is a leadership test that spans operations, fieldwork, customer care, regulatory affairs, public safety, and finance. Over the past week, Northern California entered its first red-flag warning of the season, PG&E began public safety power shutoffs in parts of nine counties, and reliability groups kept pointing to the same fact: wildfire is now a standing grid risk, not a side case.

The old model, in which wildfire planning rested largely with vegetation crews and emergency response teams, no longer fits the job. For middle and senior managers, the issue is bigger than weather or compliance. Wildfire risk seems technical until it reaches the public. Then it becomes personal, political, and expensive all at once. A shutoff may lower ignition risk, but it can also strand customers in the heat, disrupt local businesses, put medically fragile people at risk, and invite hard questions about whether the utility made the right call at the right time and in the right place. The leadership challenge is whether a utility can make tough decisions under uncertainty and defend them afterward.

## **Why this became a management issue**

The recent California event clearly shows the pressure. PG&E first warned that shutoffs were possible in parts of eight counties. As conditions tightened, the shutoffs expanded to parts of nine counties. The trigger was the pattern utilities know well: dry offshore winds, low humidity, and heat. The Sacramento office of the National Weather Service issued a red flag warning through the evening of June 11, with daytime humidity in the single digits and gusts of 30 to 40 mph. That may sound like a local weather note, but for utility management, it is a company-wide stress test.

The reason is simple. A public safety power shutoff is not just an outage. The California Public Utilities Commission defines it as a temporary power shutoff intended to reduce the risk of fires caused by electric infrastructure. In plain English, the utility chooses a controlled outage now to avoid a fire later. That choice must be made with incomplete information. Forecasts change. Wind hits some circuits harder than others. Public tolerance is thin. Field conditions shift by the hour. And once the lights go out, the company owns the human impact.

That is why the managers who matter most are not only the vice presidents. They are the operations manager deciding whether switching and patrol plans are ready; the customer leader ensuring medically vulnerable customers are warned in time; the regional field manager bringing circuits back safely without rushing inspections; and the regulatory manager who will later explain why the utility acted, what alternatives were considered, and whether the company followed its own plan.

## **The summer outlook is making the job harder**

This is not happening in a calm, reliable year. NERC's 2026 Summer Reliability Assessment notes that the Western Interconnection faces common concerns, including wildfire, resource adequacy during extreme heat, and drought that can reduce hydro output. FERC's summer reliability assessment also warns that high temperatures and extreme weather events are expected to challenge the grid. The combination matters because wildfire decisions do not happen in a vacuum. They occur when the system is already under pressure.

A decade ago, many utilities could still treat wildfire mitigation as a seasonal overlay on normal operations. That is no longer enough. Today, wildfire decisions can collide with heat events, weak overnight cooling, dry fuels, and tight operating days. In this week's Northern California event, warm overnight conditions were a concern. That means the harm from a shutoff is not limited to inconvenience. When nights stay hot, elderly customers, customers with medical needs, and people without air conditioning face added health risks. Managers cannot treat those risks as externalities. They are part of the operating decision.

This is where older utility habits can fail. A company may still be organized as if wildfire planning, outage communications, and system operations were separate lanes. But on a red flag day, those lanes merge. A manager who waits for clean handoffs will lose time. The better approach is a single operating picture that integrates circuit risk, weather, field crew availability, customer vulnerability, local emergency coordination, and restoration constraints.

### **The real leadership problem is decision quality**

People outside the business often assume the hard part is deciding whether to shut off power. That is only half true. The harder task is building a decision process that is narrow enough to be fair, fast enough to matter, and disciplined enough to hold up over time. Broad shutoffs create backlash. Late shutoffs create liability. Poorly explained shutoffs destroy trust.

POWER Magazine noted this week that utilities are turning to sub-kilometer, asset-level forecasts to support shutoff decisions they can defend before regulators. That phrase matters: defend before regulators. Not admire in a slide deck. Not celebrate in a pilot program. Defend. That should be the internal standard as well. If the model says a circuit is at risk, can the operating team explain why? Can the customer team explain why one community was affected and the next was not? Can the restoration leader explain what had to be inspected before power returned?

Good leadership here does not mean chasing perfect predictions. It means making fewer blunt choices. The more precise the risk picture, the more targeted the action can be. That helps in two ways: it reduces customer harm and improves credibility. Every mile of line left safely energized matters. Every feeder shut off without a clear reason undermines the next event before it even starts.

### **Trust breaks faster than equipment**

Managers who have already lived through storm response know this, but wildfire shutoffs raise the stakes. The public will forgive a lot from a utility when the problem is clearly an act of nature. People are less forgiving when the utility turns the power off on purpose. Even if the call is justified, the company has to explain why the burden fell where it did.

This week's reporting from Northern California highlighted the practical issue. Customers were told to check whether their address fell within a shutoff zone, sign up for alerts, and prepare. That is necessary, but it is not enough on its own. From a management standpoint, warning people is not the same as helping them cope. Local leaders want to know whether community resource centers are open, whether backup support exists for high-risk customers, whether schools and care facilities have plans, and how long restoration may take. Those questions land first with managers, not in policy papers.

There is also a fairness problem. If the same customers lose power repeatedly, they will stop hearing the utility's safety message and hear only that they are being asked to carry the cost of a stressed system.

Once that view takes hold, every shutoff becomes harder to execute. Trust has to be managed like an operating asset. It is built through smaller shutoff footprints, better notice, faster patrols and restoration, and plain language about what the utility knows and what it does not yet know.

### **Field execution is where plans either hold or collapse**

Utilities write thick wildfire plans. Those plans matter. But the public does not experience the plan. They experience the handoff from the control room to the field, from the field to inspection, and from inspection to restoration. That is why management discipline in the field is a bigger differentiator than another polished strategy binder.

When a shutoff is called, three things often go wrong. First, too many people treat the decision itself as the main event. It is not. The real work starts after de-energization. Second, restoration assumptions drift. A circuit that looked simple on paper may require more patrol time, more access coordination, or more daylight than expected. Third, the message to customers gets ahead of the field facts. That is when estimated restoration times become self-inflicted wounds.

Managers can reduce all three problems. They can insist that restoration estimates reflect field conditions, not optimism. They can pre-stage patrol routes and access support before shutoffs begin. They can keep operations, communications, and customer teams on the same clock, rather than letting each function publish its own version of events. None of this is glamorous. All of it matters.

### **What middle managers should change now**

Start with the operating picture. One live view should display weather triggers, circuit exposure, customer vulnerability, crew status, patrol progress, and restoration gates. If those elements are in separate systems and separate meetings, the company will talk past itself.

Next, narrow the decision path. Decide in advance who recommends a shutoff, who approves it, what evidence is required, and what must be documented. On a fast-moving day, ambiguity leads to either delay or overreaction. Neither helps.

Then harden customer communication. Use language people can understand. Tell them what conditions are driving the event, which areas are at risk, when the next update will be, and what must happen before restoration. Do not hide uncertainty. Put it in plain view. Customers handle bad news better than fuzzy news.

After that, focus on restoration as a managed process, not a hopeful countdown. Set expectations for patrol, access, daylight, and re-energization checks. Train supervisors to stop bad estimates before they leave the building.

Lastly, run the after-action review honestly. Do not ask only whether the utility avoided ignition. Ask whether the footprint was tighter than last time, whether the notifications reached the right people, whether the restoration timing was realistic, and where the organization still relied on heroics rather than process. If the only success measure is that no fire occurred, the company will miss half the lesson.

Managers should not duck the budget question. Wildfire programs now compete with other urgent work for labor, capital, and executive attention. Undergrounding, covered conductor, sectionalizing devices, weather tools, patrol contracts, and customer support programs all cost real money. Middle managers do not set the rate case, but they shape whether that spending yields a cleaner operating result. If the

company spends more yet still delivers broad shutoffs, slow restorations, and confused public updates, the case for the next round of investment weakens. Every dollar should connect to a narrower footprint, faster patrol, stronger notice, or a safer restoration path.

## **Conclusion**

Wildfire risk has shifted from the edges of utility management to its center. The past week made that plain. Northern California experienced red flag warnings, heat, and public safety power shutoffs simultaneously. NERC and FERC warn that summer reliability will be shaped by extreme weather, resource pressure, and regional stress. For utility leaders, wildfire is no longer a niche issue handled by a few experts. It is part of core operations.

The managers who handle it best will stop treating shutoffs as weather decisions and start treating them as company decisions. That means better evidence, tighter targeting, cleaner field execution, clearer communication, and tougher after-action reviews. Nothing about that is new in principle. Utilities have always had to make hard calls under pressure. What has changed is the cost of getting those calls wrong.

The practical test is simple: can managers make the next event smaller, clearer, and safer than the last? That is the standard that customers, regulators, and local officials will use. It should be the standard inside the utility as well.

## **References**

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## **SEO Keywords**

public safety power shutoff, wildfire mitigation utilities, utility wildfire management, electric utility risk management, grid resilience leadership