

Power grid fails in face of California heat wave

By John Burton, SEP candidate for Congress in California's 29th District
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The impact of the heat wave currently grilling California, following on from the energy crisis of 2000-2001 and the collapse of the power grid in the US Northeast in August 2003, demonstrates once again the necessity for the socialization and democratic control of essential services such as electricity supply. As demand for electricity soars across the state, basic infrastructure is already breaking down due to lack of investment, maintenance and development. Entire communities have been deprived of power in the midst of searing temperatures and the situation may get far worse.

Today will be the 20th consecutive day that significant parts of California, including the densely populated Los Angeles Basin, have registered temperatures close to or over 100° Fahrenheit (38° Celsius). Multiplying the heat wave's impact, the nighttime minimum temperature is 8 to 15 degrees higher than average and unusual humidity is also being experienced. Record temperatures are expected to continue until at least the end of this week.

While the sweltering heat cannot be totally avoided, being able to alleviate its impact is essential for millions of Californians to be able to carry out their day-to-day routines with some degree of normalcy. For hundreds of thousands of area residents—such as the elderly, infants, expecting mothers, the ill and outdoor workers—relief from the heat can be a matter of life or death.

More than 50 deaths across the state have already been attributed to heat-related factors. Among them was the death of an elderly patient at a Stockton nursing home, where the air conditioner broke down during 115° F temperatures (46° C). Los Angeles emergency services reported a spike in calls over the weekend, with 1,500 received on Saturday and 1,200 on Sunday, compared with an average of 1,000.

The record heat has caused the deaths of thousands of cows, chickens and turkeys in California, the number one milk-producing state in the country. More than a million pounds of dead livestock is rotting in the sun, as many of the rendering plants normally tasked with disposing of dead livestock have shut down or are overloaded. Several counties have passed emergency measures allowing

carcasses to be dumped in local landfills, creating a risk of contamination to ground water.

Not surprisingly, power usage has skyrocketed as people attempt to cool their homes and workplaces. Cal-ISO, the state authority that supervises the provision of close to 75 percent of California's electricity, reported that a record high of 50,270 megawatts was used on Monday. Demand today is also expected to rise over 50,000 megawatts.

State officials have issued self-congratulatory statements that, thus far, sufficient power has been provided to meet demand—unlike the energy crisis of 2000-2001, which was caused by the manipulation of supply by companies like Enron in order to drive up prices and gouge profits. Cal-ISO chief executive Yakout Mansour told the California legislature on July 12 that the state had “sufficient resources to serve load [demand] under a wide range of system requirements.”

While enough electricity may be being generated for now, however, the transmission system that carries it to consumers is experiencing widespread collapses. A glimpse into the potential extent of the crisis was provided by a lengthy feature in Tuesday's *Los Angeles Times*, headlined, “Heat stretches power network to the limit.”

The *Times* reported: “Both the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) and Southern California Edison acknowledged Monday that their systems—parts of which were built in the 1920s and 1930s—were not designed to handle anything near the power demand produced during the heat wave.”

Hundreds of obsolete transformers, which reduce the high voltage running through power lines for household use, have overloaded over the past several weeks. On Sunday alone, some 175,000 households lost power in Los Angeles due to transformer failures. As many as 17,000 homes were still without power on Monday afternoon.

Most of the 126,000 transformers in Los Angeles are at or near capacity, according to city councilman Greig Smith. DWP has needed to replace or repair at least 420 transformers in just the past month. Edison has replaced 715 in the areas it supplies power. Hundreds more are expected to fail, but DWP has just 200 in its warehouses and is not taking delivery of another 150 until September.

Unnamed Los Angeles city officials told the *Times* that “they have been trying to replace the older transformers for years but have made only modest progress because of limited funding.”

Thousands of households also lost power in the Bay Area over the weekend. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that “transformer failures left 25,000 people without power as of Tuesday morning, including 17,000 in San Jose,” according to Brian Swanson, a spokesman for Pacific Gas and Electric (PG & E).

In some parts of the state, transformers have shut down as they are not designed to cope with anything more than average power demands. Edison spokesman Steven Conroy told the *LA Times* that it would be “too expensive” to install additional transformers or ones with larger capacity in some of the areas that experienced power outages over the past week, including the Inland Empire district and San Gabriel Valley.

The short-term calculations that have left homes being serviced by aging transformers are more than matched by the narrow profit calculations that have guided investment in power generation capacity.

The official gloating that enough capacity exists to meet demand may be premature. Since the 2000-2001 crisis, the state has gained only additional 6,774 megawatts in capacity, sufficient to keep pace with rising energy demands but barely enough to cope with the unprecedented energy requirements over the past several days. As the heat wave continues, it is questionable whether supply can continue to meet demand without the imposition of power restrictions on both businesses and consumers.

According to Cal-ISO spokesman Gregg Fishman, the corporations that provide the state’s energy have simply not prepared to cope with the current conditions for any length of time. He told the state legislature on July 13 that the infrastructure existed for a “one-in-10 heat wave”—the type that occurs every 10 years. Fishman warned that “we’re not looking at a one-in-10 heat wave. I think we’re looking at one-in-50 heat wave.”

Summing up the considerations in the boardrooms of the energy conglomerates that dominate California’s power industry, Frank Wolak, a Stanford University economics professor who chairs the power market surveillance committee for Cal-ISO, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “You wouldn’t want to design the system for the weather we’re having today. It’s expensive to build these power plants, and we’d prefer them not to be idle most of the time.”

Such statements recall the testimony of New Orleans officials that the levee system was only designed to withstand a Category 3 hurricane as authorities had decided it was “too expensive” to prepare for anything stronger, such as a slow-moving Category 3 hurricane like Katrina. The city was virtually destroyed as a result.

In California and throughout the United States, no coherent plan exists for ensuring that the necessary investment takes place to guarantee power supply into the future, let alone plans to reduce the reliance on fossil-fuel power plants, which are one of the main contributors to global warming. The lack of preparation for how the energy infrastructure would cope with unusual, but far from unpredictable conditions has already resulted in unnecessary deaths and trauma.

Confronted with a situation produced by decades of neglect, the response of all levels of government has been to demand that Californians curtail their use of power. Residents were asked yesterday by state power officials to cool their homes to no more than 82° Fahrenheit (28° C), and 85° F while away from home. Fans, people were lectured, should be used instead of air conditioning, and large appliances should be used only after 7:00 p.m.

California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger echoed this line, ordering state agencies to cut energy by 25 percent and not to cool workplaces below 78° F (26° C). In a statement that combined arrogance with stupidity, the multimillionaire informed Californians that they had to ensure their children turned off the lights. He had taught his children to do so, he declared, by unscrewing any light bulbs that were left on. “They’ve gotten the message now,” he said. “There is never again a light that is not turned out when they leave the room.”

The aim of such pontificating is to place the blame for the inadequacies of the electricity grid on the refusal of ordinary people to reduce their power usage. The true responsibility lies with the capitalist system, which places all issues of social need a distant second behind the profit margins of major corporations and the fortunes of the wealthiest sections of the population.

Far from bringing about the optimal allocation of resources, profit considerations lead to the neglect of essential infrastructure. Investment in power plants, transmission systems and research and maintenance has been compromised to guarantee the highest return to shareholders.

This latest episode highlights once again the pressing need for the hundreds of privately owned companies, authorities and utilities across the United States that are involved in the provision of power to be merged together and placed under democratic control, and the tremendous financial resources currently held in the accounts of a tiny section of the population to be freed and used toward the development and maintenance of a rational system of energy production and distribution.