

Southern California power outage exposes decay of US infrastructure

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The massive power outage in the US southwest last week, affecting San Diego County in California and parts of Arizona and northern Mexico, is one more exposure of the decay of social infrastructure in the United States.

At least 4 million people were without power beginning Thursday afternoon, many still powerless late Friday afternoon. In total, the outage affected 5-7 million people. Many were left stranded in elevators, without air conditioning, or stuck in deadlocked traffic.

Temperatures on Thursday were well above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, raising health concerns for the elderly and infirm. An early estimate from the National University System's Institute for Policy Research pegged the economic costs from the blackout at between \$97 and \$118 million.

According to San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E), the blackout was sparked by a failure in the single transmission line near Yuma, Arizona. After this tripped offline, the flow of power to the entire Southwest Powerlink was severed. The only other source of power in the region, San Onofre nuclear generator, also failed.

The exact cause of the initial failure is uncertain. A spokesperson from SDG&E said that it was triggered by a single Arizona worker fixing faulty equipment at a substation near Yuma. However, this does not explain the failure of backup mechanisms.

Michael Niggli, president of the utility company acknowledged that on their own the initial failures "would cause virtually no impact," because there would be backup power, particularly from San Onofre.

"Having each of these things happen at one time is not something we have considered," he said.

Effects were far-reaching and immediate. On Thursday evening the San Diego International Airport was closed and over 70 flights were cancelled. At Scripps Mercy Hospital and Sharp Memorial Hospital, there were generator failures requiring the emergency evacuation of high-risk patients.

Nearly all traffic lights went out in the city and surrounding area, causing a multitude of accidents and delays.

At least 1.9 million gallons of sewage were dumped into the ocean due to a pumping station failure. Beaches throughout the region were closed until the county tests for bacteria contamination.

Drinking water in the county could contain dangerous levels of bacteria and other organisms as a result of the spill.

As a result of losing power, many small restaurants and businesses closed. Some restaurants and groceries were forced to dump thousands of pounds of food that may have spoiled as a necessary precaution to prevent food poisoning.

In some cases, insurance plans do not cover losses until after 24 hours of power outage—bringing tremendous monetary losses for smaller restaurants not able to finance more extensive policies.

All primary schools and colleges were closed on Thursday afternoon and Friday. Parents reporting to

work on Friday needed to find alternate places for their children to stay in lieu of school.

While the exact circumstances of last week's power outage remain to be determined, it took place against the backdrop of corporate deregulation and underinvestment in energy infrastructure.

At the same time, the ability of state agencies to respond to crisis situations created by power outages and other events has been seriously hampered by budget cuts, particularly for fire departments.

In the city of San Diego, \$11.5 million has been cut from the fire department through a rotating "brown-out plan" for Fiscal Year 2011. According to the city of San Diego's website this "represents a 13% reduction in the City's daily firefighting force. This has resulted in increased response times in areas impacted by the brown-outs."

SDG&E and its parent company, Sempra, have been sued numerous times for business practices. In 2006, Sempra paid \$377 million to settle class-action lawsuits which accused the company of artificially driving up prices during the energy crisis in 2001. In 2010, the company was forced to pay another \$410 million after it was determined that it "created fake energy shortages and avoided market rules, costing utility ratepayers as much as \$9 billion" according to a *New York Times* article published at the time.

The San Diego blackout is only the latest in a series of similar incidents, including a Florida blackout in 2008 and a massive power outage in the US Northeast in 2003.

In many parts of the country, even an ordinary thunderstorm invariably leaves thousands or tens of thousands without power. More significant events, like the impact of Hurricane Irene late last month, cut off basic utilities for millions.

Almost exactly one year ago, a natural gas pipeline in San Francisco exploded killing 4 people and injuring dozens more. As in the recent San Diego blackout, it took days to find the cause of the disaster and explain

why such a breach of public safety could have taken place.



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