

PG&E failed to do inspections and maintenance on power lines for years, report finds

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Investigators with the California Public Utilities Commission found that the Pacific Gas and Electric Corporation (PG&E) failed to inspect and repair its power lines for years before a faulty transmission line started last year's series of wildfires including the Camp Fire, the deadliest fire in state history, which killed 85 people.

The 700-page report released last week goes further than previous findings, showing the company violated state rules for maintaining electric lines and systemic problems with how the company looked after its oldest lines. The Caribou-Palermo transmission line, which PG&E admitted was responsible for the Camp Fire, had maintenance work deferred as did many other older power lines.

The report found, "the identified shortcomings in PG&E's inspection and maintenance of the incident tower were not isolated, but rather indicative of an overall pattern of inadequate inspection and maintenance of PG&E's transmission facilities."

PG&E crews had not climbed up the tower which broke down and started the Camp Fire since 2001, in violation of the company's own rules requiring that towers with recurring problems be inspected.

Investigators found that an inspection of the tower, "could have identified the worn C-hook before it failed, and that its timely replacement could have prevented ignition of the Camp Fire."

Mike Danko, an attorney representing the victims of wildfires, told *The Wall Street Journal*, "It's not one bad day, not one missed hook. They let the equipment run until it fails."

Indeed, the *Wall Street Journal* reported previously how the company knew the Caribou-Palermo line, in

operation since 1921, had reached the end of its useful life and needed inspection and repair.

In the aftermath of last year's Camp Fire, PG&E filed for bankruptcy on January 29, 2019, to shield itself from the billions in claims from its victims. The financial obligations totaled \$30 billion in liabilities but the company was quick to make the working class pay for its criminal neglect for safety.

In a move that sparked further public outrage, PG&E announced a series of rolling blackouts this year, affecting 3 million Californians and countless businesses, schools, hospitals and those who needed electricity for life-saving equipment. Instead of repairing and modernizing its decrepit infrastructure the company tried to save money by shutting off power to its lines during the fire season. Nonetheless, a series of deadly wildfires broke out in 2019 as well.

Wednesday afternoon reports from Bloomberg that PG&E was close to a deal to pay only \$13.5 billion in damages related to the Camp Fire in a mixture of cash and stock, less than half their liability, sent the company's stock prices soaring 21 percent. Despite going into bankruptcy, the company still attempted to pay its top executives \$16 million in bonuses but was only prevented by US Bankruptcy Court Judge Dennis Montali on August 30.

CEO Bill Johnson announced that blackouts could continue for another decade as the company presumably updates its infrastructure. The state investigation should give pause for those thinking the company will make good on its promises.

This Monday, PG&E admitted that its equipment started the Camp Fire but declined to comment on whether there were systemic failures in its maintenance

and inspection practices as outlined by the report. The report was released on Monday but had already been completed last month, the first anniversary of the Camp Fire.

A previous report from 2010 commissioned by the company told PG&E to climb a sample of its towers every three to five years to see if they needed repair. Needless to say, the company failed to do these inspections saying its ground and aerial inspections were enough. Another 2017 internal presentation revealed the average age of the towers was 68 years, but the average life expectancy was only 65 years of use.

The company is already on federal probation after it was revealed that it failed to maintain and inspect its gas pipeline system which killed 8 people in the San Bruno explosion of 2010. The federal judge overseeing the case found that the company has violated the terms of its probation and is weighing further sanctions.

In regards to last year's wildfires, the investigation found that the company knew about problems on the line before the fire but did not identify them as anything serious. When a PG&E crew found a loose anchor on a lattice-steel tower close to where the fire started, they labeled it as a repair that need to be done within a year. Investigators determined this repair should have been given highest priority and immediately dealt with.

According to the report, "the current and prior inspection and maintenance programs were inadequate" and failed to find defective hooks and other potentially faulty equipment.

The Caribou-Palermo line wasn't the only transmission line that needed to be repaired. Another hook on a nearby tower has also been severely damaged by years of weather and friction. Even worse, the report found that PG&E didn't note the results of previous inspections, noting, "this raises the question of whether inspectors were evaluating cold-end hardware even when they performed climbing inspections."

While the report lists dozens of violations of the utility commission's rules, it does not include any recommendations. The callous indifference to human life expressed by PG&E is the natural result of the subordination of human need to private profit. Between 2006 and the end of 2017, PG&E made \$13.5 billion in net profits. Over those years, they paid nearly \$10

billion in dividends to shareholders but never found the money to maintain their lines.



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