

Local Utility Companies Coordinate with First Responders at the Whittier Fire

When the Whittier Fire swept through the Santa Ynez Mountains above Highway 154 on July 8, Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) already was on scene finishing work at the recent Alamo Fire. When the smoke began to clear and it was safe to enter the fire area, damage assessment teams used helicopters and ground crews to survey the work ahead.

Thirty-four utility poles and almost a mile of conductor line needed replacement — a challenging task in the area of an active wildfire. PG&E customers include those depending upon communications installments on Santa Ynez and Broadcast Peaks, The PG&E service line goes as far south as the Santa Ynez and Broadcast Peaks. Southern California Edison (SCE) uses the same transmission lines, and has distribution lines serving Goleta, Santa Barbara, and south.

Southern California Edison (SCE) owns two 120-foot-tall line towers in the Whittier Fire area, distributing 12,000 volts of electricity. SCE Fire Management Officer Troy Whitman reported that neither of the towers were seriously damaged, but their insulators did suffer smoke contamination. To wash them, a 120-foot-tall boom on a truck affixed with a holding tank was utilized to spray water on them at a force of 1,000 pounds-per-square-inch. The operation was conducted while the lines were still powered or “hot”. Deionized water was used to prevent electrical conduction during this process.

“From our standpoint, this interagency cooperation was a huge success,” said Whitman.

PG&E Public Safety Specialist Pam Purdue said the cooperation of fire managers at the Whittier Fire was key to their operation’s success. In 2009, PG&E fully adopted the Incident Command System (ICS) based on best practices of the US Forest Service and CAL FIRE. Today PG&E utilizes their own Incident Management Teams (IMT), allowing the company to focus on customers’ critical needs in and around the fire area, without draining local resources.

“The biggest challenge was access in the steep terrain,” Purdue said, adding “California Team 3 (the IMT managing the Whittier Fire) was phenomenal to work with.” Whittier Fire personnel coordinated closely with PG&E, using bulldozers to open access roads damaged during the fire, and to improve fuel breaks around the towers.

PG&E assembled a lakeside operations camp at Cachuma County Park, where 135 employees and a convoy of support vehicles were based for a week. On Sunday, July 16, power was restored to all PG&E customers in the fire area who were able to receive it. Sixteen primary residences and 30 outbuildings were destroyed on the first day of the fire, and the cause of the fire remains under investigation.