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Don't let global warming hinder California's climate goals

By **V. JOHN WHITE** |

PUBLISHED: June 9, 2019 at 7:10 am | UPDATED: June 10, 2019 at 6:17 pm

California has proudly led the world as an environmental pioneer and renewable energy champion. Sadly, this does not make us immune to the devastating effects of global warming. The deadly, climate-driven wildfires that have ravaged communities and rendered the state's largest utility company bankrupt are now the biggest threat to our state meeting its climate goals.

The California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, or Assembly Bill 32, was groundbreaking legislation that established the state's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and fighting climate change. Since then, the state has continued to progress policies that advance clean, renewable energy and climate solutions.

Yet, while our environmental policies have gotten stronger, so unfortunately has the severity and frequency of our wildfires. According to Cal Fire, nine of the 10 largest wildfires and eight of the 10 most destructive wildfires in the state's history occurred between 2007 and 2018. And if climate change continues at its current pace, things will only get worse.

Citing the billions of dollars in potential damages from the fires of the past two years, Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) declared bankruptcy in January. The bankruptcy could impact not only wildfire victims and PG&E customers, but also hundreds of renewable energy projects that have long-term power purchase agreements with the utility company.

These renewable energy projects – which include a diverse mix of solar, wind and geothermal – have served as the building blocks of our carbon-free future. They represent early investments made in California's then burgeoning green energy economy and have had a significant impact on the state's ability to meet its renewable energy targets.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has said that the state will continue its momentum toward its climate goals, but a recent report by his wildfire strike team warns that a bankruptcy by a major utility “drives up costs for consumers, threatens fair recoveries for fire victims, undermines the state’s ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and creates uncertainty for utility employees and contractors.”

If PG&E is permitted to modify or walk away from its long-term renewable energy contracts as part of its reorganization, the consequences will be far-reaching. Both current and future renewable energy projects will be at risk as banks and investors will lose confidence in California as a clean energy partner. Project developers may also be forced to seek bankruptcy protection to stave off foreclosure from lenders.

This chilling effect will slow future renewable energy deployment and impair the state’s ability to reach its climate goals. The impact could ripple well beyond the energy sector – other industries may also be dissuaded from investing in California due to regulatory uncertainty.

As the state and the courts work through the PG&E bankruptcy, it is critical that we uphold our environmental commitments, which are the best tools we have to protect our state against future climate-driven disasters. Reneging on our commitments will have dire consequences for our environment and our economy.

V. John White is executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, a partnership of major environmental groups and clean energy companies.

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