



JUICE: Falling Off the Clean Energy Wagon

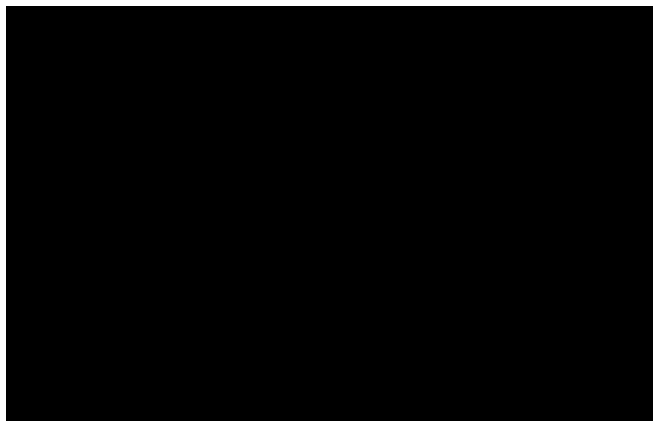
Updated June 11

Since the start of this century, California has been working to wean the electricity sector off addictive and harmful fossil-fueled generation. A homegrown 12-step recovery program has produced impressive strides. But key players, and Pacific Gas & Electric in particular, are allowed to fall off the wagon.

State energy regulators approved June 11 PG&E's installation of diesel powered-backup systems for use during threatening fire conditions. Like those who return to binge drinking, this latest approval will harm more than the utility. The community impact is magnified during this pandemic, especially for those with compromised systems who cannot afford an extra dose of dangerous diesel exhaust. It also undermines California's nearly two decades of work to slash carbon pollution from the electricity sector. And, it exacerbates the underlying condition that worsens wildfires: climate pollution.

California took its first big green energy step with the creation of a renewable portfolio standard for electric utilities in 2002. The legendary Sen. Byron Sher (D-Palo Alto) authored legislation mandating that 20% of a utility supply portfolio come from solar, wind and other qualifying alternative energy resources by 2017. Subsequently, the mandate was upped to 33%, then 50% and now 60% by

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2030, under SB 100 passed in 2018. The remaining 40% of resources under SB 100 is expected to be supplied by large hydropower so California's electricity is carbon free by 2045. In addition, former Gov. Jerry Brown issued an executive order in September 2018 directing California's economy attain carbon neutrality by 2045.

California launched in 2007 a \$3 billion program to get 3,000 MW of new solar installed over a decade. It also has invested significantly in electrifying buildings and replacing gas water heaters with solar powered ones to reduce climate pollution created in the state, as well as advance the Golden State's solar industry.

The state is taking a major step backwards allowing diesel powered microgrids, undermining clean energy investments and mandates. PG&E is not the only company using diesel backup, so too are some power plants certified by the California Energy Commission. But PG&E merits the scrutiny because the California Public Utilities Commission just approved its installation of 320 MW of diesel-fueled microgrids at substations. These backup systems, to be financed with ratepayer dollars, are set to fire up when the utility cuts off power due to fire danger this year.

PG&E asserts the use of mobile diesel generators is "a necessary bridge until non-fossil-fueled alternatives are available."

Diesel is one of dirtiest fuels, spewing carcinogens, climate pollution, and lung damaging particulate matter. Last October, nearly 125,000 backup systems were used during PG&E's unprecedented power outages during high, dry winds. These generators "released a cumulative total of 166.4 tons of nitrogen oxides, 19.4 tons of particulate matter, and 8.9 tons of diesel PM—the equivalent of about 29,000 additional heavy-

duty diesel trucks on the roads, according to the California Air Resources Board.

Numerous community energy, and environmental justice and clean air organizations object to the CPUC's approval of PG&E's plan to soon install temporary diesel microgrids.

The Sierra Club told the Commission that the PG&E plan is "unsupportable" because the distributed backup generation "is likely to result in long-term commitments to new gas resources, contradicting PG&E's own plans, Commission decisions, and California's climate and air quality mandates."

The Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies pointed out non-fossil local options must be considered first. This includes extending battery duration, along with "solar, demand response, and targeted energy efficiency, that are better aligned with overall state policy."

PG&E's 2020 diesel backup plan is said to be temporary and limited to this year. But PG&E has not explicitly committed to a plan detailing how and when it will transition away from dirty microgrids.

The CPUC decision states the diesel projects are allowed only for this year. But advocates of clean microgrids want an enforceable and transparent commitment. They worry that the commission will not hold PG&E accountable. They insist that it explicitly forbid the use of diesel microgrid after this year.

Avoiding fossil fuel bingeing and staying on the clean energy wagon is the only sane way forward for a state wracked by climate pollution, wildfires, and outages.

—*Elizabeth McCarthy*

CATEGORIES

California Public Utilities Commission, CEC, Community Choice Aggregation, Diesel power, Funding and financing, Global warming, Outage, Pacific Gas & Electric, Public (Free!), Resource Adequacy, Top Stories, transparency, wildfires

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