

Sagging PG&E power lines caused fatal NorCal fire last year



ees work to fix downed power lines burned by wildfires in Santa Rosa, Calif. on Oct. 12,

MORRIS/BLOOMBERG



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A year after wildfires devastated Northern California last October, officials have determined that two sagging Pacific Gas and Electric Co. power lines coupled with high winds caused Yuba County's fatal Cascade Fire.

The fire, which ignited on October 8, burned a total of 9,989 acres and destroyed 264 structures in its path. The blazes resulted in four civilian fatalities and one firefighter injury.

Cal Fire said in a statement Tuesday that high winds caused the two sagging lines to come into contact, creating an electrical arc that "deposited hot burning or molten material onto the ground in a receptive fuel bed causing the fire."

The Yuba County District Attorney said in a statement upon reviewing Cal Fire's report that it would not press criminal charges.

The Cascade Fire was one of some 170 fires that ravaged Northern California last Fall — killing 44 people and destroying as many as 8,900 structures and 6,100 vehicles. The state tallied almost \$10 billion in commercial and residential insurance claims, with estimates for total damages as high as \$15 billion.

PG&E has lobbied California legislators all year for financial assistance in settling these claims, even floating a potential bankruptcy filing to shield it from the wildfire costs.

Last month, California's Gov. [Jerry Brown signed a bill that assists PG&E in covering](#) these charges — passing along some of the burden to ratepayers in the process. The bill, SB 901, enables PG&E to issue state-authorized bonds to settle more than 200 wildfire-related lawsuits filed by 2,700 plaintiffs against the utility, with higher electricity bills helping to repay the bonds. The law also requires power companies to implement fire prevention strategies by improving their infrastructure, clearing potential fire-fueling vegetation and maintaining their power lines.

“The safety of our customers, their families and the communities we serve is our most important job,” PG&E said in a statement following Cal Fire's findings. “Without question, the loss of life, homes and businesses in these extraordinary wildfires is heartbreaking and we remain focused on helping communities recover and rebuild.”

The droughts and extreme weather conditions brought on by a changing climate will only worsen the region's risk of fatal blazes. A recent [California climate change assessment](#) found that by 2100, if greenhouse gas emissions keep increasing, the frequency of extreme wildfires would also spike — the average area burned statewide rising by 77 percent. By 2055 in high-risk regions, wildfire insurance costs could rise by 18 percent, according to the report.

Cal Fire is still investigating the cause of the Tubbs Fire, which barreled through Sonoma County and was the most destructive wildfire in California history. The agency said it will release its findings once the report is completed.