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## State lawmakers targeting blackouts, emergency communications with recent bills

A broadband grant program has been proposed

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LAKE COUNTY — Another piece of legislation has been added to a growing group of state bills currently in various stages of the legislative process that could change the impacts of future wildfire safety-related power outages carried out by utilities like Pacific Gas and Electric Company.

California Assembly Bill 2163, called the Rural Broadband and Emergency Infrastructure Grant Act of 2020, was introduced Tuesday by Assemblymembers Robert Rivas (D-Salinas), Cecilia Aguiar-Curry (D-Winters) and Devon Mathis (R-Visalia).

No vote has yet been taken on the bill, which would change state telecommunications laws to set up a grant program aimed at equipping all fairgrounds in California with publicly accessible broadband internet for use in emergencies.

Noting that she'd been working on the bill for years, Aguiar-Curry said in an interview on Wednesday that fairgrounds are a "hub" for emergency services during wildfires. "That's our meeting place," she said.

While it's not specifically targeted at PG&E power shutoffs like the ones that put most of Lake County in the dark several times last year, the bill would bring another source of emergency communications technology to rural areas.

"As we try to deal with the (Public Safety Power Shutoffs) and working with PG&E and the Governor's office, this is a piece we could really promote," Aguiar-Curry said.

"The number one word for Lake County, and other rural counties, is access," she added.

Citing reports by the California Public Utilities Commission and the California Emerging Technology Fund, the bill describes a statewide disparity in access to broadband (a term used generally in the bill to mean "high-speed internet") between urban and rural communities. According to the 2017 CPUC report mentioned in the bill, less than half of California's rural population has access to broadband, while 98 percent of its urban residents do.

"One solution to address this inequity is to ensure that broadband infrastructure is installed at all California fairgrounds," the bill states, "which are focal points for many rural communities and have immense economic, educational, social, and cultural opportunities and impacts."

During emergencies, fairgrounds are often used as staging areas for firefighters and utilities crews. Bringing fast internet to state fairgrounds (the Lake County Fairgrounds in Lakeport is a local example) could also improve recovery center options, the bill indicates.

"Fairgrounds provide equitable and essential access points as staging areas for first responders and as evacuation and recovery centers," the bill states. "Unfortunately, many fairgrounds lack one vital element: permanent high-speed open-access internet."

The bill would require that a group of state agencies including the departments of technology, food and agriculture, emergency services and the CPUC jointly develop a program to bring grant monies to fairgrounds.

A slew of other bills that deal with emergency communications infrastructure and power outage management, some authored by state senator Mike McGuire (D-Healdsburg) who represents portions of Lake County, have been introduced in the past year.

SB 560, already signed into law in late 2019 and authored by McGuire, requires that telephone service providers give advance notice to customers who could be affected by a shutoff like the massive ones executed by PG&E last year, if they are likely to lose phone service during the outage. The bill specifies that these customers who must be notified include emergency personnel at police, fire and sheriff departments as well as hospitals.

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SB 470, which was introduced by McGuire, would require that the power and telecommunications companies to meet with emergency personnel to discuss power outages.

SB 801, a bill from McGuire and Senator Steve Glazer (D-Contra Costa), was introduced last month. The bill would require utilities like PG&E to provide backup batter packs to power personal medical equipment needed by medically vulnerable customers in advance of a power shutoff.

Another McGuire and Glazer-introduced bill, SB 431, which was amended in the assembly on Monday, would require telecommunications companies to have backup power systems for their wireless towers in high fire risk areas. The bill "empowers the California Public Utilities Commission to develop desperately needed regulations to keep cell towers energized during extended power shutoffs," McGuire's office said in a statement last year.

SB 378, a bill introduced by Senator Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco) that passed the senate last month, would add public utilities regulations that require PG&E and others like it to reimburse their customers for financial losses during deliberate blackouts.

Another bill that could affect the circumstances around future wildfire risk-prompted power shutoffs is SB 753, introduced by Senator Henry Stern (D-Calabasas), which could require county social services departments to release the names and addresses of certain vulnerable clients to emergency personnel in the event of a public emergency.

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