



Is California Going Up in Flames?

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California—the Golden State. Home to Hollywood...Silicon Valley...Napa Valley. Glitz...Glamour... and now...blackouts.

In 2019, California became the first state ever to intentionally deny electricity to its own citizens. No power for your home, your Tesla, your cell phone or, maybe, your oxygen tank.

This is California we're talking about—not some impoverished third-world country. *California*. If it were a sovereign nation, it would be the fifth-largest economy in the world—ahead of the UK and France! But in the hot, dry months of late summer and early fall, it can no longer provide electricity to its own citizens. It has to shut down its aging power lines or risk starting another catastrophic fire.

In 2018, the town of Paradise burned to the ground. Over 10,000 homes were destroyed; 85 people died. In 2017, the Redwood fire killed nine people. California has always had wildfires. But now the fire threat is worse than ever. Why?

For the answer, we should look to one of the state's leading citizens—Leonardo Di Caprio: “The reason these wildfires have worsened is because of climate change.” Case closed? Well, not quite. But Leo isn't wrong. Climate change has made the problem worse. He's just not right in the way he thinks he is.

Let's get into it.

Long before “global warming” became “climate change,” Californians had to deal with fires. The hot, bone-dry summer and fall winds, thick forests, and dense brush that cover good portions of the state made sure of that. As the state's population grew, the citizens, always aware of fire risk, took steps to mitigate that risk—sometimes intentionally, sometimes not.

First, there were large-scale logging operations. These helped thin the forest. Then there were “controlled burns”—fires purposely set to clear areas of brush in fire zones which were then quickly extinguished. As the influence of the environmental movement grew more pronounced at the end of the last century and into this one, the state's policy changed. First, new regulations sharply curtailed logging operations. Cutting down trees for lumber was depicted as almost an act of cruelty. Even clearing dead trees was frowned upon.

Controlled burns were viewed the same way. It was much better, the environmentalists contended, to let nature do its thing. And, as housing became more expensive in the big cities, developers started to build homes further from metropolitan areas and closer to the

wilderness.

Parallel to this was the state's green energy mandate. Governor Jerry Brown declared that California would be powered entirely by renewable energy—mostly wind and solar—by 2045. Tremendous pressure was put on Pacific Gas and Electric, the state's largest energy company, to get started on this project.

Here's where Leo gets it right, if unintentionally. The green energy mandate turned the power company's attention and resources away from the power grid and to wind and solar. How did this lead to new and deadlier fires? Let's put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Wildfires can be started in all sorts of ways: lightning strikes, campfires not properly put out, a cigarette carelessly tossed away or, sometimes, straight-up arson. But the worst culprit of all is power lines. In 2018, fully half of California's wildfires were started by power lines or related electrical problems. It's not hard to figure out why: California's power grid is ancient. Most of its towers were built before 1950. Some of the lines are so old they qualify for the National Registry of Historic Places. The lines that are failing and sparking fires? No surprise—the old ones.

The deadliest fire in California history—the 2018 Camp Fire that burned down Paradise—was caused by equipment that dates back to 1921. One-hundred-year-old equipment! It's not that the power company didn't know there was a problem. They knew. But they were focused on more pressing political priorities. Like green energy.

That's where PG&E, a public utility—which just means it's the politicians who call the shots—put its money and resources. In 2018, PG&E spent \$2.4 billion on renewables. By comparison, in 2017 it spent \$1.4 billion on existing infrastructure.

So let's review: The forests grow ever more dense...brush builds up because controlled burns are not permitted...developers build in wilderness areas...and the dominant power company chases its renewable energy mandate at the expense of nuts-and-bolts line maintenance. Such are the things uncontrollable fires are made of.

Where are we now? PG&E is in bankruptcy—sued into oblivion, with no viable plan to fix the grid. Instead of bringing vital infrastructure into the 21st century, California is voluntarily turning itself into a third-world country. That's what happens when progressives and environmentalists run things.

The Golden State isn't going green. It's going broke, and it's going dark. When that happens, maybe a light bulb will finally turn on in the heads of California voters.

I'm John Kobylyt for Prager University.