

The Jacob Journal

A Newsletter from Supervisor Dianne Jacob

May 2001

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Beating the Rolling Blackout Blues

Just how much power generation does San Diego County need to bring on-line if it hopes to escape rolling blackouts this summer? Is there any chance of avoiding blackouts altogether? The answers are just as complicated as the current state of California's failed deregulated electricity market.

If we take a look at our state's power grid and the agency that controls it, we shed some welcome light on the basics of power emergencies, and we uncover a few ways to minimize the threat of blackouts this summer.

The Independent System Operator (ISO), which operates the grid, is the voice that orders curtailments during the hot weather months. However, it's the strange structure of California's grid that has everything to do with if and when our region goes dark.

As we learned all too well over the winter, when the state's power reserves fall below seven percent, the ISO orders one of three increasingly serious emergency stages. Interestingly, these stages are declared not regionally, but statewide. In the words of an ISO spokesperson, "San Diego County is not an island and cannot be separated out

from the rest of the state. If your neighbor's house is on fire, you're going to help put it out," said the spokesperson, "and if a region is short, all regions must share in the burden."

To continue on with the ISO's metaphor, my question is, what if the hose just won't reach?

This was the case on January 17, when a Stage 3 power emergency was declared and by ISO guidelines, went into effect for the entire state. San Diego County homes, businesses, schools and institutions including all County-owned facilities, were asked to scale back electricity use.

Businesses terminated shifts and sent employees home to alleviate strain on the grid while the County extinguished all unnecessary lighting and installed back-up generators at a several facilities. A school district actually held classes outdoors under the assumption that it was contributing electricity to the power-starved grid.

Several weeks later, I learned that these massive conservation measures were in vain. KGTV Channel 10 news reporter Mark Matthews obtained the production logs from one of our region's largest privately-owned power generating units. The logs revealed that one of the plant's generating units was placed on idle during the Stage 3 emergency.

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Blackout Blues

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The company did not purposefully withhold power from the grid. Rather, the state's transmission system simply was not capable of transporting the plant's available power to Northern California where electrical supplies were dangerously low.

In reality, there was never a shortage of energy in the San Diego region on January 17. In fact, on that day, the San Diego region had power to spare. The problem was a transmission system bottleneck called "Path 15" which limits the amount of power that can be transported from Southern California to Northern California.

The dirty little secret of the state's power grid is that it unfairly penalizes some regions for the electricity shortfalls of others. I am determined to see that the lights don't go out in San Diego simply because there are power shortages in Northern California. Our region plays far too pivotal a role in the state's economy to "share" in artificial emergency stages, especially if there is a surplus of power in our own backyard.

Last month, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to join me to shield our County from shortfalls in the North and demand that the ISO implement regional, not statewide, power emergencies. It is my belief that rolling blackouts are more manageable, predictable and, above all, fair, if they are implemented regionally.

Demand Reduction Program Protects San Diego Economy

Regional emergency stages might protect us from shortfalls in other parts of the state, but the stages won't help if our own region is running low on power reserves. The threat of tight supply in the San Diego region is dangerously high this summer thanks to light rainfall, the high price of natural gas and unscheduled generator maintenance. By all accounts, a conservation program is in order.

Because I know it's easier to get one large business to commit to conservation than it is to bring together the same energy-using equivalent of households, which would be in the hundreds, I've supported an alliance of our region's businesses called the Coalition for Energy Independence which is working with the County to develop a strategic conservation program.

I know that energy is the lifeblood of business and similarly, business is the lifeblood of the San Diego economy. That's why I share the Coalition's fears about the stability of our economy in the event of rolling blackouts. Employers cannot guarantee employee safety when the lights go out unexpectedly. The threat of equipment damage increases when the power is curtailed with little or no warning. Production costs, already rising throughout the region because of higher electricity bills, will undoubtedly increase to compensate for lost production hours.

We know that there are several time periods every day when demand on the state's grid spikes significantly. These are the hours of 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and again from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. I am optimistic that working together, regional businesses and the County can find creative ways to "level out" those peak spikes on the grid.

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Protect Economy

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This idea was unanimously supported by the Board of Supervisors last month and details should be available in the coming weeks. I am confident that if the businesses who use the most power can stagger their production schedules to shift peak load on the state's power grid, usage might then be distributed more evenly throughout the day and the County may perhaps, avert rolling blackouts.

Help Take a Bite Out of the Summer Power Crunch

According to San Diego Gas and Electric, our most troublesome month will be June when a statewide shortfall of 3,647 megawatts is almost certain to launch blackouts. The San Diego region must pick up 7.4 percent of this deficit according to SDG&E and that means our homes and businesses must find 270 megawatts of power if we want to keep our light bulbs burning.

If there's one thing we can all agree on this summer, it's the importance of cutting consumption to ensure reliability to our region.

San Diego residents can beat the summer heat with attention to the smaller details in our homes:

- Set air conditioners to 78 degrees or higher, use fans in place of air conditioners, take advantage of trees, awnings, solar window shade screens or sun-control window film to keep out the sun.
- Turn off lights when leaving a room, install timers on lighting and replacing incandescent light with compact fluorescent lights which can reduce costs by 75 percent.
- Weather strip and caulk homes, check insulation to be sure it's adequate and install energy efficient windows to reduce drafts and ultra-violet sunlight by up to 75 percent.
- Operate appliances including washing machines and clothes dryers before 11 a.m. and after 8 p.m. to reduce peak demand on grid.

Join me for Coffee and Conversation...

Friday, May 11, 2001, 10:00 a.m. to noon

Kountry Kitchen
826 Main Street, Ramona

Friday, May 25, 2001, 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

Pine Valley House Restaurant
28841 Old Highway 80, Pine Valley

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We hope to hear from you soon!

May-01

DIANNE JACOB

Supervisor, Second District
San Diego County Board of Supervisors
1600 Pacific Highway, Room 335
San Diego, CA 92101

(619) 531-5522
(800) 852-7322 toll free
(619) 696-7253 fax

e-mail:
Dianne-Jacob@co.san-diego.ca.us

website:
www.diannejacob.com

The Second District Staff (619)531-5522

Shannan Sorrell
Chief of Staff

Mike Kulis
Deputy Chief of Staff

Teresa Alvarez
Administrative Assistant

Caroline Braun
Field Representative

Jeff Collins
Policy Advisor

Darren Gretler
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