



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)  
783 45<sup>th</sup> Ave  
San Francisco, CA 94121  
415.221.2562  
415.520.5218 FAX  
LCanton@LucienCanton.com  
www.LucienCanton.com

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# The California Fires and Unintended Consequences

## *When Good Intentions Go Bad*

One of the coping mechanisms described in the conflict theory model of decision making formulated by Janis and Mann in their book, [Decision Making](#), is unconflicted change. This is the tendency to carry out a protective action if there are no negative consequences for taking that action. Unfortunately, it's not always easy to see potentially negative consequences and seemingly positive actions often result in unintended consequences.

### **Mitigating Risk or Protecting Profits?**

This is well illustrated by the actions of the Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) Company in opting to cut power to areas at high risk of wildfires.

You will recall that in the past two years, PG&E has been found responsible for two of the worst wildfires in California history. The has led to a liability exposure of over \$30 billion and forced the company into bankruptcy. In addition, the fires have severely damaged the company's reputation when it was revealed that PG&E continued to post profits and pay dividends despite reducing

budgets earmarked for maintenance such as tree-trimming.

Recognizing that reducing the risk of wildfires through maintenance and upgrading of components will take years, PG&E has opted to turn off power to high risk areas whenever a combination of extreme weather and fire load meet certain conditions. This is intended to reduce the risk of a damaged powerline serving as an ignition source. While it is hard to argue against the need to reduce the risk of another major conflagration, PG&E's major concern is the reduction of liability rather than concern over its customers.

The shutting off power is not as simple a solution as it seems. There are obvious increased risks to the medically fragile, for example. Further, turning on power to damaged lines can result in fires, so PG&E must inspect hundreds of miles of transmission and distribution lines before restoring power. This means that a shut off can last days beyond the weather conditions that initiated it. In some extreme cases, customers have gone without power for a week or more.

## Unintended or Ignored?

Cutting power to high risk areas has produced consequences, some of which were foreseen and others that should have been. Emergency managers did a credible job of both warning the public that the outages were coming and encouraging preparedness for extended loss of power. In some ways, this has been a positive outcome from the outages.

However, from the emergency management perspective, the single biggest concern has been the impact on our ability to provide warning and notification. It's no secret that we have become increasingly dependent on technology to accomplish this. But what do you do when the technology is non-existent?

Because of the advance notification, many of the public arranged to recharge cell phones and other devices. However, without power, cell phone towers are not always operational. Those with battery backups are only intended to last for a short time. The result is that in many of the highest risk areas, cell phone coverage is non-existent or spotty. In Sonoma County, site of the Kincade Fire, over 16% of the cell sites were down, resulting in a loss of service to 27% of the customers.

What is particularly frustrating is that cellular providers assured the FCC and the State Public Utilities Commission that they were prepared for the outages with permanent generators at most towers, backup batteries at others, and portable generators available for deployment. As of this writing, the cellular providers have offered no explanation for their failure to provide service.

Added to the loss of cellular communications was the fact that most landlines are now dependent on power and that many people

have switched to voice over IP (VOIP) services through cable providers. Consequently, the dial-up systems used by many jurisdictions could not be relied upon.

Radio stations have always been a reliable fall back for emergency notifications, with the public urged to keep portable radios in their emergency kits. However, they too rely on power. Some seventeen radio stations went out of service during the outages. I'm aware of at least one that remained in service but lost Internet connectivity, their main source of news.

## Balancing Risk

The situation is clearly unacceptable, but as in most of emergency management, there are no simple solutions. While it is easy to place the blame on PG&E's poor maintenance record, one can also point to our wildland fire policy that results in an increased fire load. Climate change that produces increased drought conditions also plays a part, as does increased housing construction in the wildland-urban interface. None of these factors can be mitigated in the short term.

Which leaves with PG&E's short-term solution of shutting off power to at-risk areas. While the outages do potentially prevent fires (following a previous outage, PG&E reported hundreds of damaged lines), it will not prevent all. The Kincaid fire was most likely started by PG&E equipment. The potential mitigating effects of an outage must be balanced against the loss of our ability to provide adequate warning in case a fire does occur.

The answer will depend on a partnership between government and utilities, a relationship that is still adversarial at best. 