

## Ensuring 911 Service on Mobile Phones During Wildfires, High Winds, Ice and Snow Storms and Other Disasters

To: [Clackamas County Commissioners](#)

From: [Emergency Preparedness Council](#)

[October 17, 2023](#)

### Summary:

Picture yourself in a crisis, desperately reaching for your cell or landline phone to dial 911, only to find there's no service or dial tone. Regrettably, this is a recurring nightmare for countless individuals in Oregon, one that strikes multiple times each year when a storm hits or there is a Public Safety Power Shutoff. It's a nightmare that is occurring frequently due to the expansive and intensifying wildfires and other natural disasters in the state. In times of disaster or widespread emergency, the absence of access to emergency services and critical public alerts via phone, cell or internet places lives in grave jeopardy. Most landlines now use the same fiber optics that provides internet service. Thus, no power means no cell, landline, or internet service.

On Labor Day, 2020, Portland General Electric (PGE) cut the power to the Mt. Hood Hwy 26 corridor due to an unpredicted high wind event during extreme high risk fire conditions. Over 5,000 full time residents not only lost power, but were left with very weak cell phone signals when the cell towers switched to generator backup. The 24-48 hour shut-off went on for six full days with the Riverside fire raging only 15 miles to the south. A change in wind direction to the south would have driven the fire into the Mt. Hood community. On day three of the power outage, the cell towers ran out of fuel for their backup generators and cell service went down completely. This is an area that is unable to get broadcast television signals and the emergency AM radio stations were not sending out anything but static. The only way to find out what was happening with the nearby fire was to get into the car and drive to Sandy, 15-25 miles away and check the cell phone where service was available. That drive could have put the person into the fire. Thus, the Mt. Hood corridor community was unable to receive emergency updates and stay situationally aware of what was happening.

The panic was real as residents were unable to call emergency services, get PGE updates, or accurate fire information. It was a terrifying three days of not knowing what was going on during a natural disaster. It was unacceptable.

### Problem:

At present, there are no mandates in place demanding that cell towers situated within High Fire Threat Zones or anywhere in Oregon establish and adhere to performance reliability standards. As it stands, when cell towers experience outages, the outage disrupts 911 services or the capacity of emergency agencies to issue vital alerts to cell phones, and there exists no fallback option for citizens. The absence of a mandate for cell tower sites to maintain backup power sources places residents in regions susceptible to natural calamities at an elevated level of peril.

### Solution:

The Clackamas County Emergency Preparedness Council is requesting the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners send a letter to the Governor and Oregon Legislature informing them of the need to adopt legislation requiring cell service providers to have a minimum power backup for 14 days and address other notification issues. This legislation would be similar to California's Senate Bills SB 560 [McGuire, 2019. Wildfire mitigation plans: deenergizing of electrical lines: notifications: mobile telephony service providers. Attachment A].

Commented [1]: @rvmccarthy@gmail.com here is the letter for edits and review to lift up the importance of this based on recent events like fire, ice, winter storm. Assigned to Rachel McCarthy\_

Commented [2]: @pdxmelinda@gmail.com here is the letter for edits to highlight the importance based on recent events like fire, ice, and snow storm. Assigned to Melinda McCrossen\_

[SB 670 \[McGuire, 2019. Telecommunications: community isolation outage: notification, Attachment B\]](#) and [SB 341 \[McGuire, 2021. Telecommunications service: outages, Attachment C\]](#). Additionally, former Representative Lori Kuechler recognized this problem in Oregon and gave a presentation on the issue in 2022 ([Attachment D](#)).

The EPC also asks Clackamas County to reach out to [the other counties for support of this legislative effort](#). The EPC and Mt. Hood Corridor Wildfire Partnership will also reach out and gather support in a collaborative effort.

**The [Legislation](#) Would do the Following:**

Require the PUC to develop and implement performance reliability standards for backup power systems. This would ensure that in the event of a power outage, backup power systems are both reliable and effective.

All cell towers located in High Fire Threat Zones [and other areas of Oregon](#) will need to develop appropriate standards. Some of these standards include:

- Establish a minimum operating life for backup power systems of no less than ~~96 hours (4 days)~~. ~~In some remote areas, 14 days would be preferred.~~
- Establish means to warn a customer and emergency responders when the backup power system is low or when the transceiver system can no longer be supported by the backup power system.
- The commission shall collect data necessary to identify the mobile telephony service base transceiver station infrastructure.

The [legislation](#) would ensure that our residents, as well as state and local emergency responders, have the crucial information they need to save lives.

Regards,

Malia Kupillas, Chair of the Clackamas County Emergency Preparedness Council

[Attachment A. California SB 560 \[McGuire, 2019. Wildfire mitigation plans: deenergizing of electrical lines: notifications: mobile telephony service providers.\]](#)

[Attachment B. California SB 670 \[McGuire, 2019. Telecommunications: community isolation outage: notification.\]](#)

[Attachment C. California SB 341 \[McGuire, 2021. Telecommunications service: outages\]](#)

[Attachment D. Former Rep. Lori Kuechler, House District 22, Emergency Communications During Power Outages. Prepared December, 2022](#)