

BUSINESS

Newly uncovered documents reveal potentially disastrous decision before deadly wildfire: 'Margin of error is so small'

"There might be some bad ramifications."

By Simon Sage / March 11, 2025



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Documents uncovered by the [Los Angeles Times](#) show that electric utility Edison could have helped to prevent catastrophic [wildfires](#) if it had followed through on infrastructure upgrades.

What's happening?

Dramatic winds in January caused residents of Altadena, California, to request Edison turn off the power for fear of live wires starting a fire. Edison did cut power to some lines, per the Times, but that may have started a [wildfire](#) anyway due to an overload at a tower in Eaton Canyon.

As of early March, the cause of the Eaton fire remained [under investigation](#). However, even according to mid-February reporting by the Times, Edison had "acknowledged that evidence suggests its equipment may have played a role." The [Eaton fire](#) killed 17 people and destroyed more than 9,000 buildings in the area, as [Cal Fire](#) reported.

Do you think our power grid needs to be upgraded?

- ☐ Definitely 👍
- ☐ Only in some states 👍
- ☐ Not really 🙄
- ☐ I'm not sure 🤔

Click your choice to see results and speak your mind.


The documents uncovered by the Times revealed that Edison was warned that its towers could overload and cause a fire risk in the event of a shut-off. The California Independent System Operator (CAISO), which manages aspects of the state's grid and electrical market, had issued a study on wildfire risks in 2022. That study flagged the transmission lines in Eaton Canyon as a risk and recommended "reconductoring" and other improvements.



"What they found ... was if they did the reconductoring project, they could de-energize the lines in Eaton Canyon [more safely]," said Cody Warner, an energy scholar at the Energy Institute at Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley, per the Times.


Energy analyst Robert McCullough was able to identify the CAISO's stance in the 2022 report

that "there might be some bad ramifications" from such a shut-off, including "a surge along these major transmission lines."

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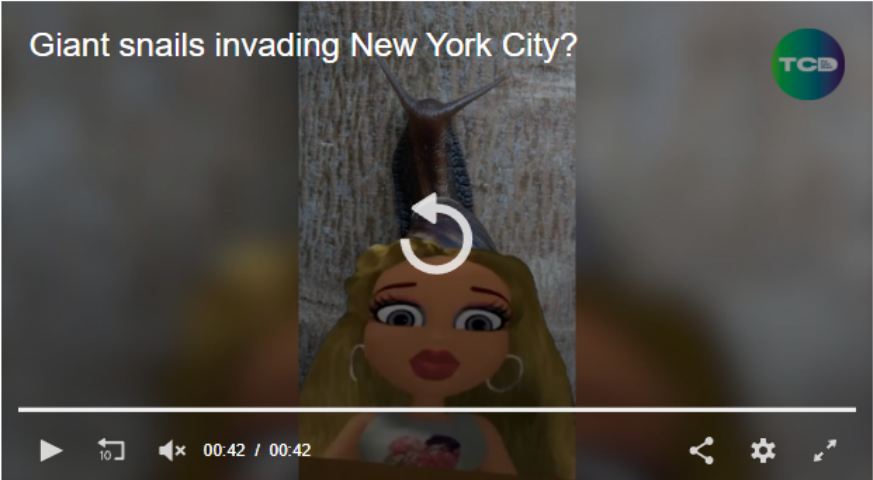
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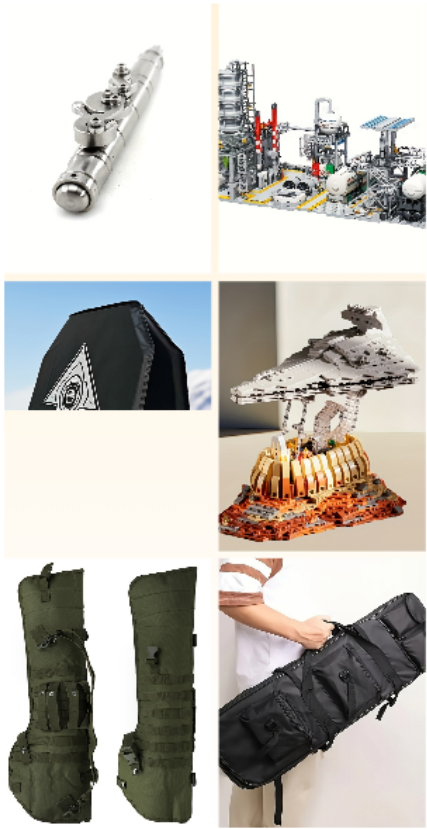
Giant snails invading New York City?



Edison had even begun work on rectifying the issue with infrastructure upgrades but told the

Times through a spokesperson that it was subject to "material delays," "outage coordination challenges," and "complexity around transmission and planning transmission through metro areas." These upgrades are expected to be completed in May.

Edison noted that it is still unknown what started the fires, and a California Independent System Operator spokesperson said, per the Times, that its study assessed the potential benefit of the reconductoring project "under a different wildfire study scenario."



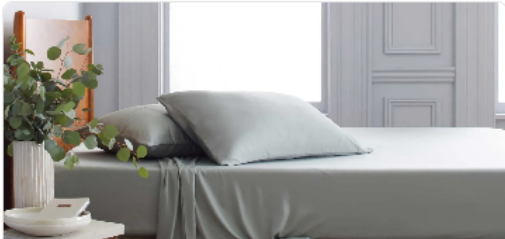
Why is electrical grid management important?

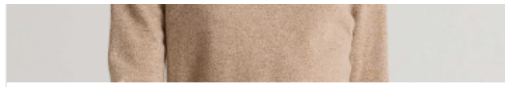
As [extreme weather](#) events increase in intensity, length, and frequency, infrastructure needs to become more resilient to help citizens maintain access to vital services.

While electrical lines pose risks, they're also becoming more important as cities accelerate electrification.

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"We can look after the fact and see that the consequences of potentially not de-energizing the transmission lines are enormous," Warner told the Times. "It just shows that the margin of error is so small in these [extreme weather](#) events."

What's being done about electrical grid management?

Electrical regulators need the power to enforce higher standards in the face of growing wildfire risks. Thankfully, there have been [some improvements in national grid regulation](#).




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