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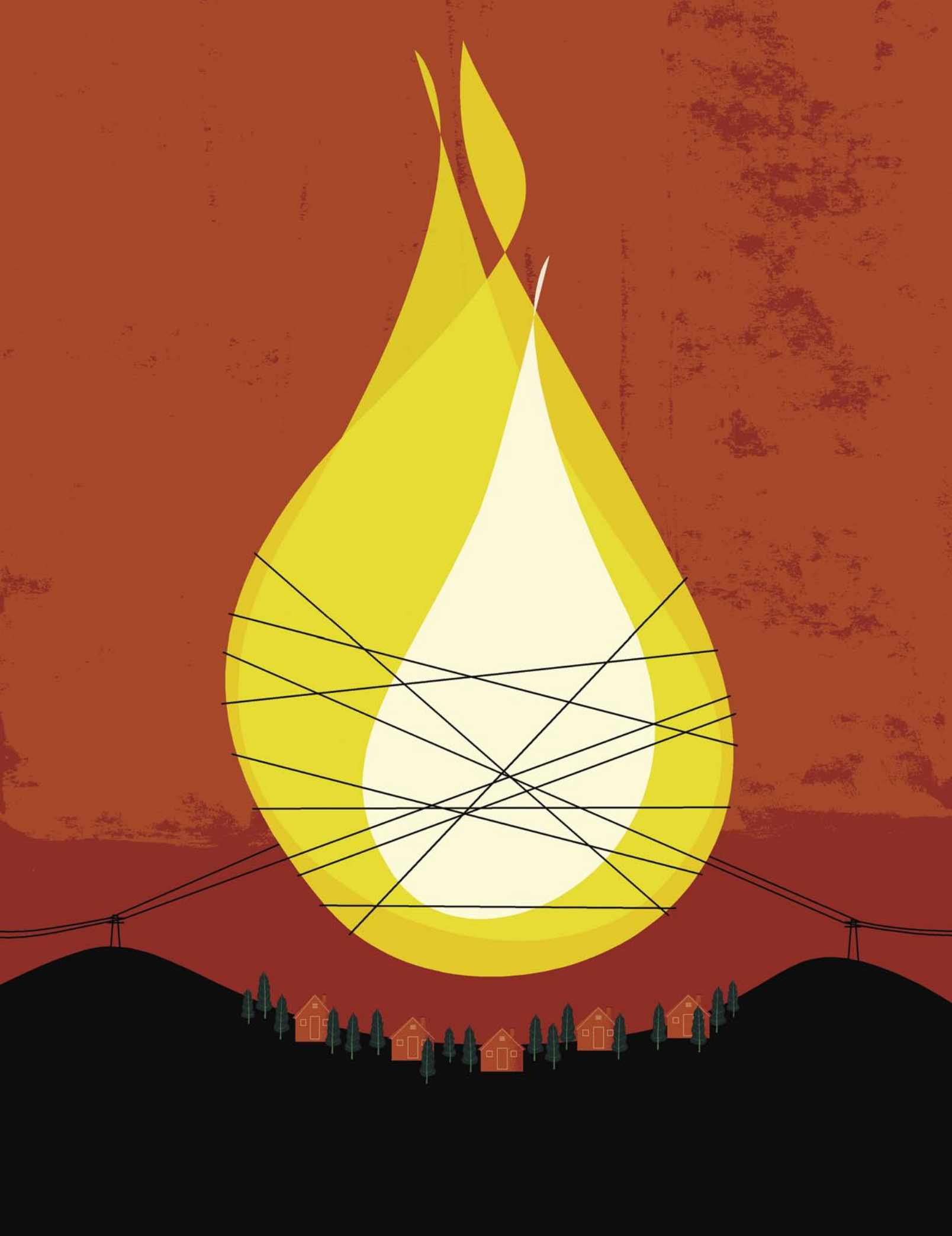
GETTING SMART ABOUT DISASTER

UTILITIES STEP UP DISASTER
PLANNING EFFORTS

When a tinder-dry forest suddenly ignited into a major firestorm west of San Diego on a hot windy afternoon in October 2003, officials at San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E), a division of Sempra Energy, quickly took action. As the fire gained momentum, moving through inland areas and threatening other communities, the utility activated an emergency operations center (EOC). From this site, officials coordinated their emergency response by deploying employees, communicating with the utility's customer base, and preparing for major restoration work once the fire was quelled.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE AUSTIN

BY AL SENIA



■ ■ ■ “With that firestorm response, we really had to think quickly outside the box,” recalls Scott Drury, emergency services manager for the utility. “There were a lot of logistics issues to consider. We had 41 different staging areas to supply. Just feeding the repair crews alone was a major issue. Since a lot of the affected areas were remote, we had to send in 6,000 meals a day for two weeks.”

The background organization work paid off. Officials quickly and accurately assessed the scope of the problem, coordinated with other emergency agencies, and promptly decided to ask for help from outside utilities in supplying repair crews, equipment, and even telephone polls. As the dry weather triggered additional fires throughout the region, SDG&E’s effort proved prescient. Days later, many other utility companies needed much the same infrastructure support.

Such disaster planning is becoming more commonplace for utility companies across the country, as the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks triggered a renewed emphasis on disaster planning — both on the national and local levels.

“Utility companies have always taken this issue seriously,” says Ken Hall, director of security for Edison Electric Institute, an industry trade association based in Washington. “But after 9/11, that whole experience has thrown the preparedness challenge into a larger focus. September 11 has been a big catalyst in thinking more about it.”

National Plans

Some of that focus has been prompted by national initiatives. In February 2003, President Bush issued a national directive to the Department of Homeland Security, ordering the establishment of a National Incident Management System (NIMS) to provide “a consistent nationwide approach for federal, state, and local governments to work effectively and efficiently together to prepare for, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity.”

The aim of NIMS, which was placed under FEMA, is to integrate emergency preparedness and response under a comprehensive national framework for incident management. Utility companies are included in this framework, which is still being developed. It is to include “a core set of concepts, principles, terminology, and technologies covering the incident command system; multi-agency coordination systems; unified command; training; identification and management of resources (including systems for classifying types of resources); qualifications and certification; and the collection, tracking, and reporting of incident information and incident resources.”



The directive also established a National Response Plan that integrates “government domestic prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery plans into one all-discipline, all-hazards plan.”

Utilities, of course, are no strangers to coping with natural disasters — especially those in California, which have been at the forefront of disaster planning and response. Within the last few years, SDG&E coped with wildfires, Pacific Gas & Electric dealt with a major earthquake, and Southern California Edison experienced energy shortages that triggered rolling blackouts. Other natural disasters in the state included periodic flooding, landslides, and mudslides.

Early Efforts

Since the early 1950s, California has had its own emergency response office that sprang from the Cold War imperative to plan for nuclear disaster as well as established its own State Emergency Management Systems (SEMS), which provide a framework for emergency response and may well end up providing the framework for the NIMS plan, according to FEMA officials. No other state has such emergency preparedness programs in place.

“ Companies have become more sophisticated in disaster planning and response. ”

California is way ahead of other states in emergency planning, says Ray Riordan, executive director of the California Utility Emergency Association (CUEA), which evolved from the original 1952 Office of Emergency Services. Located in Mather, Calif., CUEA, a voluntary group with 92 private and municipal utility company members, basically acts as a clearinghouse for state utility emergency preparedness and response — sponsoring workshops and programs, helping develop mutual aid programs, and keeping the issue very much on the radar screen of utility executives.

“We do a lot of lessons learned, best practices, and how we can improve response,” Riordan explains.

CUEA also helps ensure utilities and other emergency responders work proactively with utility companies. “We are a voice with the [state] Office of Emergency Services to exchange information and resources for mutual aid,” he says.

The mutual aid can involve both in- and out-of-state responses: CUEA coordinated California utilities’ reaction in the aftermath of last year’s devastating Florida hurricanes.

SEMS basically provides California with a coordinated response plan that ties together municipal and state organizations, including utilities, when emergencies occur, and helps ensure they can communicate with each other and respond effectively. In some cases, mandates specify that utilities, for example, must be able to communicate with their customers within a certain period about when power in affected areas will be restored. Essentially, it provides for a standardized response capability that flows through the state’s emergency operations centers that are activated when a disaster occurs. Jim Boland, director of safety and emergency services for SDG&E, says he’s noticed a dramatic change in the way utilities in California and other states approach disaster planning over the last 15 years. Back in 1990, the typical response plan was operationally focused. Now, such plans are much more geared toward customer outreach. “We looked more internally at ourselves in the past, he says. “Now it’s a more strategic approach” that includes, for example, letting customers know when power will be restored and establishing a system to check the status of employees own communities after a disaster, so they can focus more easily on restoring services in badly impacted areas. California’s programs also have prompted utilities to play a more proactive, planning role with other emergency agencies.

Executives at other utilities also believe that their companies have become more sophisticated in disaster planning and response. Pat Laird, vice president of corporate security for Exelon, says utility companies have adopted a two-tiered approach to emergency planning. The larger parent company focuses on business continuity planning, making sure that the company itself can operate with key functions such as IT kept intact, perhaps from an alternate site, during an emergency. The individual utility divisions, on the other hand, are more focused on field operations, restoring services as quickly as possible during emergencies.

“We have a solid emergency plan in place, and we conduct drills and tests,” Boland says. “We feel confident that we’ll be able to respond effectively to a crisis.” ☒

EMERGENCY CHECKLIST: *What Utility Executives Need To Know*

Ray Riordan, executive director of the California Utility Emergency Association has a long history of helping utilities prepare for disasters. As the federal government becomes more involved with ensuring smooth communications and responses among various agencies, including utility companies, he offers the following checklist for executives:

- 1. Learn how to collaborate with other agencies.** To be most effective, a utility company must define a role among first responders to an emergency. At what point does the utility become involved?
- 2. Take prudent measure of what to implement.** It’s important to know what kind of minimum response you’ll be expected to provide beforehand and to ensure you’ll have adequate resources to do so.
- 3. Support the emergency program once implemented.** This includes providing the necessary training and emergency practices and making these visible and familiar enough so they become part of your routine daily operations. This lessens uncertainty during an emergency.
- 4. Stress interoperability.** Make sure your systems can communicate efficiently with other first responders so that all agencies — fire, police and utilities — will work together efficiently in an emergency.