

Short Investigation Report

Incident Number: E20191101-02

Date of report: 7/21/2020

Engineer: Andie Biggs

Utility: PG&E

Incident address: Alhambra Way & Forest Ave

City: Martinez

County: Contra Costa

Brief description of incident:

At approximately 1551 hours on October 27, 2019, a fire was reported near Alhambra Ave and Forest Way in Martinez. On November 1, 2019, PG&E learned through media reports that Contra Costa City Fire Department determined the cause of this fire to be attributable to PG&E's electric facilities.

Findings:

On October 27, 2019, at approximately 1551 hours, Contra Costa City Fire Department (Con Fire) received a fire alarm located at Alhambra Avenue and Forest Way in Martinez, CA, located along PG&E's Alhambra 1101 12 kV line. The fire burned approximately fifty acres of unincorporated land. The fire did not affect any nearby structures, nor lead to any injuries or fatalities. The fire was not located within a Tier 2 or Tier 3 High Fire Threat District. No associated outage occurred.

On November 1, 2019, PG&E became aware that its facilities potentially caused the fire, as the Con Fire report concluded that the cause of the fire to be "Power Lines/Transformer". PG&E had not been aware before this time since no associated outages or faults occurred, and PG&E did not complete any associated equipment repairs. PG&E reported the fire under media criterion.

On November 6, 2019, ESRB Staff conducted a site visit, first with PG&E personnel and then separately with Con Fire personnel. During the PG&E portion of the site visit, PG&E confirmed that no evidence had been collected, nor did PG&E have any fault or outage data for this circuit around the time of the fire. Some of the equipment on the main pole ("incident pole" see Figure 1) above the burned area looked to be recently installed, including both the primary and secondary crossarms, but PG&E confirmed that such was unrelated and completed before the fire. The incident pole had some burn damage up to PG&E's secondary equipment, but newly installed equipment was unaffected. ESRB Staff did not observe any clearance issues nor signs of equipment failure. Additionally, there was not a transformer on the incident pole.



Figure 1: Incident pole, showing burn damage from the fire.

During the Con Fire portion of the site visit, ESRB Staff asked how the fire department concluded that electric facilities were the cause of the fire. Con Fire obtained a photo from social media indicating that the fire started near the incident pole (see Figure 2). Since no physical evidence of the source of ignition on the ground was found, and since no witnesses came forward regarding possible observed arson, by process of elimination Con Fire determined the electric facilities as the likely cause. ESRB Staff spent the rest of the site visit trying to observe any sign of arcing along electric lines using binoculars but did not observe any visible evidence from the ground.



Figure 2: Early stages of the fire, provided by Con Fire

On December 18, 2019, ESRB Staff conducted an evidence viewing with AT&T of full lengths of the 200 and 400 cable that had been replaced due to damage from the fire. Approximately 140 feet of each cable was underground, and 22 feet was above ground. The cables did not display any obvious sign of possible contact, only signs of melting (see Figure 3). Replacements were made due to such melting of the cable from the heat of the fire.



Figure 3: Damaged AT&T facilities

AT&T determined that the incident pole did not need to be replaced, as the fire only affected the exterior portion of the pole and did not compromise pole strength. AT&T stated that when completing repairs, no clearance violations were observed, nor was there any clear indication of the cause of the fire from either electric or telecommunications facilities. When asked about the exposed grounding, AT&T stated that it was Comcast. ESRB Staff followed up with Comcast to have the grounding covered.

PG&E performed patrols in September 2017 and December 2019, and inspections in December 2013 and October 2018. No issues with the incident pole or any equipment attached to the pole were identified as part of these inspections and patrols. No work orders have made changes, repairs, or replacements to the incident pole or associated equipment since the original installation of the pole on October 15, 2011.

Since ESRB Staff is not aware of any substantial evidence relating to the cause of the fire currently the cause of the fire is unknown.

Documents obtained:

- PG&E Initial Report
- PG&E Final 20-day Report
- PG&E SmartMeter Data
- PG&E Site Photos
- PG&E 2016, 2017, and 2019 Patrol Records
- PG&E 2013 and 2018 Inspection Records
- AT&T Evidence Viewing
- Contra Costa City Fire Department Fire Report

Conclusion:

The Assigned Engineer has reviewed the evidence and discussed the incident with the supervisor, who has concluded that the incident does not warrant a thorough investigation. Therefore, the incident is closed, and no other report will be prepared at this time.