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No traffic signals, no gas stations: How motorists are coping with California's power outages

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USA TODAY

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Motorists did their best to cope with a world without electricity Thursday in large swaths of California, dealing with darkened streets, traffic signals without power and uncertainty about whether their preferred gasoline or car charging stations would stay open.

For the most part, people were still getting to where they needed to go. As drivers apparently were heeding advice to be extra careful, police said they were not immediately seeing more traffic accidents as a result of the power outage that has affected up to 2 million Californians.

"It may be too early to say," said Officer John Fransen, spokesman for the California Highway Patrol's Golden Gate Division, "but as of right now, there doesn't seem to be an increase."



The blackouts were ordered Wednesday and Thursday by Pacific Gas & Electric and Southern California Edison in windy areas as a precaution against power lines that could spark wildfires.

The move immediately complicated lives for anyone behind the wheel. Some gas stations were unable to power pumps, leaving motorists to search other places for fuel. Street lighting was out. And motorists were being reminded to treat any intersection with a non-functioning traffic light as a four-way stop.

Not all vehicles could stay on the move in blackout areas. Waste Management, the trash hauler serving Shasta County, said it would be unable to collect the garbage Thursday from 1,200 rural residents. Spokesman Paul Rosynsky said it was "due to the inability to fuel our collection trucks because of the PG&E power outage."

Cars and trucks that pulled into a normally busy Simi Valley gas station in Ventura County found yellow tape surrounding the pumps and a handwritten

sign on the door informing customers of the closure early Thursday afternoon.

But the outage didn't last long. Just after 2 p.m. PST, the lights came back on. Minutes later, an employee was unfurling the yellow tape. Cars and trucks pulled in and drivers grabbed a drink inside or filled up their tanks.

One special concern: tunnels that no longer had lighting.

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Caldecott Tunnel, which connects Oakland and Contra Costa County's populous suburbs, like Walnut Creek, was threatened with closure.

At Caldecott, Caltrans had to install generators Wednesday morning and switched power over at midday, before power was cut Wednesday evening.

At the Tom Lantos Tunnels, which carry traffic between San Francisco and coastal cities to its south, authorities had to borrow power from one of two grids connected to the tunnel to ensure the lights remained on for the Wednesday morning rush hour, Caltrans spokeswoman RocQuel Johnson said.

On Tuesday night, city officials in nearby Half Moon Bay feared the tunnels would be closed on Wednesday, but by 7 a.m. they got word that a solution had been worked out overnight.

“So far we haven’t had to lose power on any tunnels and tubes, so we’ve been able to keep them open and keep traffic flowing,” said Bart Ney, spokesman for Caltrans' San Francisco Bay Area office.

Public transportation was generally operational in the Bay Area, though one Caltrain station in Morgan Hill lost power. Trains were still running but travelers could not buy tickets from vending machines or swipe their fare cards at the station.

In San Leandro, a bayside suburb south of Oakland, officers were doing their best to move motorists safely through the city.

"We've had an increased police presence in anticipation of the power outage since Tuesday morning," said city spokeswoman Alice Kim. "And they've been working around the clock ever since."

In Half Moon Bay, authorities scrambled to set up generators at several key intersections, such as where Highway 92 meets Highway 1, a major thoroughfare along the Pacific. Generators allowed signals to remain functional, rather than go into flashing red mode that adds to congestion.

"We’ve had limited city staff to deal with the traffic impacts," city spokeswoman Jessica Blair said.

More: [Here's what you need to know about the California power outages](#)

Electric-car charging station operators warned customers to charge up before the outages began. ChargePoint has roughly half of its 41,000 places to charge in California. In the 34 counties affected by the PG&E power outages, the company has more than 17,500 charging stations, though executives would not say how many were out of service.

"We have been encouraging drivers to charge up," said Colleen Jansen, chief marketing officer for ChargePoint. Its network uses a mobile app to let drivers know which stations were open and available.

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"We think our drivers are pretty savvy. They planned for the blackout and were able schedule charging time," she said.

Electric car drivers — at least those with cars that have high-capacity batteries — didn't sound particularly inconvenienced by the outages.

"Honestly, I am not," said John Stringer, who lives near San Jose and drives a 2018 Tesla Model X with 290 miles of range. Given his usual commute, "I could go three full days" without a recharge, he said. Still, he lingered a little longer at one of the car brand's high-speed Supercharger stations to add another 50 miles of range to his car just to be safe.

Stringer, who founded the Tesla Owners of Silicon Valley, said if the outages become worse, he'll simply use his car's infotainment screen to track down the closest charging station.

And Omar Sultan, president of the Norcal-Reno Tesla Owners Club, said he was reassured knowing his electric 2013 Model S could make his roundtrip commute from Sacramento to San Jose with 20 miles of range left to spare. He said it helped that Tesla pushed a message to drivers' screens advising them to charge up ahead of possible power outages.

"I think they did a pretty good job," Sultan said. "The proactively sent messages out."

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