

Senate Bill 431

Ensuring 911 Service on Mobile Phones during Disasters

Senator McGuire & Senator Glazer

Summary

Imagine being in an emergency situation, picking up your phone to call 911, and having no service or dial tone. Unfortunately, millions of Californians are faced with that reality several times a year and these real-world scenarios are increasing due to the size and scope of California's wildland fires. In an emergency or catastrophic situation, lack of access to emergency services or public alerts puts lives at risk.

SB 431 is a simple step to mitigate the risks during times of crisis and phone outages by having reliability standards in place for all mobile telephone towers located within areas with significant risks. This common-sense approach will ensure that in a time of emergency, the towers are operating. SB 431 will provide citizens with access to communication, while providing critical information about emergency situations.

Background

Under existing law, the Public Utilities Commission has regulatory authority over public utilities, including telephone companies. Existing law requires the commission to develop and implement performance reliability standards for backup power systems installed on the property of residential and small commercial customers by a facilities-based provider of telephony services upon determining that the benefits of the standards exceed the costs.

During the power outages in October of last year, nearly 2 million Northern California residents had their landline, cell phone and cable service interrupted.

Over 800 cell towers across California did not have sufficient backup power which meant the tower went dark. Over 454,000 cable and wireline subscribers were out of service due to the power shutoffs. During disasters, the inability of the cell towers to communicate evacuation notices and emergency alerts cost the lives of many people.

Problem

Currently, there is no requirement that cell towers located in Tier 2 or Tier 3 High Fire Threat Zones have to develop and implement performance reliability standards.

Currently, when cell towers go down—affecting 911 service or the ability for emergency officials to send emergency alerts—citizens have no back-up to turn to. With no requirement for cell tower sites to have backup power, residents in areas with high risk of natural disasters are at greater risk.

Solution

SB 431 would 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 Tier 2 or Tier 3 High Fire Threat Zones will need to develop appropriate standards. Some of these standards include:

- Establish a minimum operating life for backup power systems of no less than 72 hours.
- Establish means to warn a customer 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.

SB 431 will ensure that our residents, as well as state and local emergency responders have the crucial information they need to save lives.

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