

PG&E accepts blame for San Francisco power outage

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec 23 (Reuters)

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. on Tuesday accepted full responsibility for last weekend's huge San Francisco blackout, opening the door to what could be millions of dollars in damage claims against the utility.

The main culprit for the blackout was an overheated cable that triggered a fire at a major, unmanned power substation.

But company officials, citing a preliminary investigation, said a speedier response to the first alarm in their control room might have limited or even prevented the outage.

"It was almost two hours from when we received the first alarm of a breaker trip until we had a person in the building," Jeff Butler, Pacific Gas & Electric's vice president of operations, maintenance and construction, told a news conference.

"We're accepting full responsibility for the fact that we did not respond as promptly as we should have ... (which) may have extended the duration of the outage," he added.

The fire knocked out electric service to about a third of San Francisco's 780,000 residents, forcing the evacuation of stores, restaurants and theaters packed with holiday shoppers and tourists.

It took the utility, a subsidiary of San Francisco-based PG&E Corp. ((PCG.N)), about 30 hours to fully restore power in the city.

Butler invited anyone who believed they had lost business because of the outage to file a claim against the company.

PG&E has faced similar claims before.

The company paid out about \$12 million to cover damages from a massive blackout on Dec. 8, 1998 resulting from worker error at a substation in nearby San Mateo, a mistake that cut the power to about 370,000 PG&E customers in San Francisco and neighboring suburbs.

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