

FIRE

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are still under investigation, The Associated Press reported it may have been caused by a sparking utility line.

According to the AP article, a day before the fire began, the giant utility Pacific Gas & Electric Co. contacted Betsy Ann Cowley, saying the company needed access to her property in Pulga, California, because its power lines were causing sparks — and the fire that incinerated the neighboring town of Paradise and killed at least 42 people started Thursday near Cowley’s property.

On Monday, fire investigators declared the area surrounding the power lines on Cowley’s property, which is in an oak-filled canyon, a crime scene. Security guards would not let PG&E inspectors pass.

Cowley was on vacation last Wednesday when she got the surprise email from PG&E. Details of that exchange, described to The Associated Press, combined with the utility’s track record in California wildfire history, has again brought the company under scrutiny.

The email said that crews needed to come to her property to work on the high-power lines, Cowley said. PG&E told her “they were having problems with sparks,” she said. They visited her property but she said because she wasn’t there Wednesday she was

not aware of their findings.

Cowley was back at the property Monday and expressed gratitude at finding most of the 65 structures on it still standing, just a few hundred feet from the crime scene where investigators worked to determine what had happened to spark the massive fire.

The former landscaper bought Pulga, an abandoned and decrepit historic gold prospecting town, in 2015 and embarked on a project that transformed it into a picturesque private destination.

She cleared overgrown brush, patched up buildings and added new ones. With Bay Area artists and architects, she re-created a town, complete with a stage and schoolhouse. And then, a year ago, she opened for business, renting out Pulga for corporate retreats.

The AP article described what happened when Cowley reached the site of her own home.

She raised her hand to her cheek and said, “It’s gone. That’s where all my stuff was, but it’s not there anymore.”

She paused and picked up a mug that somehow had survived the inferno. “It’s OK,” Cowley told herself quietly. “It’s OK.”

PG&E declined to discuss the email it sent Cowley with AP, saying it has provided an “initial electric incident report” with state regulators and will fully

cooperate with any investigations.

Publicly, PG&E has said it experienced a problem on an electrical transmission line near the site of the massive fire minutes before the blaze broke out.

In its Friday filing to the state Public Utilities Commission, the company said it had detected an outage on an electrical transmission line near the site of the blaze. It said a subsequent aerial inspection detected damage to a transmission tower on the line.

The area where CalFire says the blaze started and where PG&E says sparks were detected on Cowley’s property is roughly the same, according to an AP reporter at the site.

The utility, which has been criticized and sued in a number of other large and deadly fires across California, had announced before the blaze started that it might shut down power in nine counties, including Butte County where Pulga and Paradise are, because of extreme fire danger. But, later on Thursday, PG&E said it had decided against a power cut because weather conditions did not warrant one.

State Sen. Jerry Hill, a Redwood City Democrat and longtime critic of the utility, called the report of troubles on PG&E’s lines in the area extremely worrisome.

“If PG&E is found responsible for burning down the



AP photo

An investigator with the Fresno County Sheriff’s Department searches the remains of a home in the aftermath of the Camp Fire in Paradise, California.

state again, at some point we have to say enough is enough and we have to ask should this company be allowed to do business in California?” Hill said in the AP article. “These fires take (only) a spark, and at least in the last few years fires have been caused by negligent behavior by PG&E. We need to see how we can hold them responsible, or look at an alternative way of doing business.”

California utility regulators are working with CalFire staff on a separate investigation into whether PG&E complied with state rules and regulations in areas that were torched in the deadly Camp Fire.

The California Public Utilities Commission will be evaluating PG&E’s

maintenance of its facilities, vegetation management and emergency preparedness and response, said commission spokeswoman Terrie Prosper.

This is not the first time PG&E’s management practices have come under question in the drought-stricken state.

In 2014, regulators ordered the state’s investor-owned utilities to set priorities for inspecting and removing dead and sick trees near their power lines, warning that “climate change has facilitated and exacerbated numerous wildfires” that have damaged and threatened their facilities.

But after a wildfire killed two people, destroyed 475 homes and scorched 70,000

acres in the Sierra Nevada foothills the following year, homeowners and their attorneys questioned whether PG&E had done enough to clear dry trees flanking its power lines. In 2016, CalFire ultimately found PG&E was responsible for that fire, after tree maintenance by PG&E and its contractors led to a tree falling on a power line.

Investigators have determined that PG&E equipment started several of the 2017 wildfires in Northern California wine country that killed 44 people. The company says it expects to pay more than \$2.5 billion in damages.

Observer Reporter Cherise Kaechele contributed to this story.

JUDGE

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in Union and Wallowa counties, Mona was defeated by Wes, who has worked as an attorney for 22 years in La Grande. Wes, who registered as a non-affiliated voter for the 2018 election, was criticized by multiple individuals who wrote letters to The Observer for being a “Democrat” and being supported by the “most liberal element of our community.”

Wes said he will be politically independent as a judge, as is required by law.

“I want to make sure people know I can be fair and I won’t bring politics into the courtroom,” Wes told The Observer Monday. “I changed my voter registration to non-affiliated when I decided to run, so I would have skin in the game.”

Wes was elected with 52.67 percent of the vote in Union and Wallowa counties, where the governor received less than 27 percent of the vote and her appointed judge was defeated.

The Observer previously reported Wes had been considered by the governor for the circuit court judge opening, but Wes disputed he was ever vetted.

“There was never really a serious attempt to consider my experience as a lawyer representing people or to look into my background,” he said. “Not a single reference was called. That’s one of the reasons we decided to run a campaign and let the people decide. The people of Union and Wallowa counties know my record and background much better than the governor would ever care to know.”

Wes will take office in January. Before then, he is seeing through his final cases as a lawyer, including defending a man in a DUI case and making an argument in front of the Oregon appellate court in December.

Wes has spent his entire time as an attorney in private practice, defending those charged with crimes, settling land disputes and helping locals set up businesses. He said running his own practice will help him as a judge.

“We need a judge who has represented regular people, who is not a government lawyer,” he said.

When asked about his priorities as a judge, Wes said he wants to make sure individuals’ constitutional rights are protected in his courtroom.

He referenced a 2009 attempted murder case in Wallowa County, where then-Wallowa County District Attorney Mona Williams and Scott Jackson of the Oregon Attorney General’s Office argued in favor of restricting media coverage. Judge Philip Mendiguren issued an order stating the media could not report on testimony until the trial was over, which was scheduled to last two weeks.

Wes was the defense attorney in the case and said he argued against the order.

“The press has a right to report on public trials,” he said he told Judge Mendiguren. “Secondly, it’s a matter of free speech. The press and anybody watching a trial has the right to speak about what happens in that courtroom, as long as it doesn’t impair a fair trial. My client in that case and all defendants have a right to a public trial. The government, in that case, was about to violate three very important constitutional rights.”

After a meeting with the judge, Wes, Mona, Jackson, and reporters covering the trial, the judge revoked his order and the media was allowed to report on the trial.

Wes went on to list a number of constitutional rights he’ll work hard to protect as a judge.

“Those are the only rights criminal and civil litigants have when they go against



Observer file photo

Wes Williams won the election with 55.69 percent of the vote in Union County, compared to 43.61 percent of the vote in Wallowa County.

the power of the government or huge corporations,” Wes said. “In court, you’re equal to the U.S. government. You’re equal to the government of Oregon, to the largest corporation in our nation. But, you’re only equal if those rights are protected and honored by the court.”

When it comes to gaining the trust of law enforcement and other public officials who supported Mona’s campaign, Wes said he isn’t too worried.

“I’ll gain their trust,” he said. “I’ll work hard to gain the trust of all the citizens so they know I’m a fair judge. My role in the law up until now has been as an advocate, and I’ve been an advocate for individuals who have been charged by the government. But once I’m sworn in, I won’t be an advocate anymore. I’ll take an oath to be neutral. I’m going to honor that oath just as zealously as I honored my oath to be an advocate.”

Wes said he will close his private practice after he is sworn in as judge in January. He stopped taking litigation work when he began his campaign last June. He will rent out his law offices, but he said a deal hadn’t been finalized yet so he couldn’t name the new tenants.

Wes said he will miss being an attorney.

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