

Agency: Deadly California fire caused by homeowner equipment

By **DON THOMPSON**
Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — In a long-awaited report, state investigators said Thursday that a 2017 wildfire that killed 22 people in Northern California wine country was caused by a private electrical system, not equipment belonging to embattled Pacific Gas & Electric Corp.

The state firefighting agency concluded that the blaze started next to a residence. It did not find any violations of state law.

"I eliminated all other causes for the Tubbs Fire, with the exception of an electrical caused fire originating from an unknown event affecting privately owned conductor or equipment," CalFire Battalion Chief John Martinez wrote in his report.

Some details about the property, including its owner and address, were blacked out of the report. It said the Napa County property about 3 miles north of Calistoga was built in 1946 on about 10.5 acres with a wine cellar, pool and several outbuildings.

The fire was one of more than 170 that torched the state in October 2017. It destroyed more than 5,600 structures over more than 57 square miles in Sonoma and Napa counties.

PG&E previously said it plans to file for bankruptcy protection next week, citing billions of dollars in potential damages from lawsuits linking its equipment to other deadly blazes for which it has been determined to be at fault.

The company said in a statement that despite Thursday's finding, PG&E



AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

In this Oct. 14, 2017, file photo, a firefighter holds a water hose while fighting a wildfire in Santa Rosa, Calif.

"still faces extensive litigation, significant potential liabilities and a deteriorating financial situation."

Gov. Gavin Newsom said billions of dollars in potential damages from wild-fire-related lawsuits stem from the wine country fire.

"This obviously begs the

question, Now what? Do we anticipate that PG&E will move forward ... to file bankruptcy?" Newsom told reporters in Sacramento.

"They have the right to make that determination and we will respond accordingly."

Michael Kelly, an attorney for victims of the fire,

said the findings wouldn't have much effect on the lawsuits he has filed.

"We're going to stick by our guns," Kelly said, adding that there are still questions about why PG&E didn't cut power to the area despite a high fire danger. He said there is also evidence that contradicts the findings of state fire investigators.

Trading of PG&E Corp. stock was halted twice after news about the cause of the fire prompted a surge of buy orders. Once trading resumed, the price rocketed up, closing up \$5.96, or nearly 75 percent, at \$13.35 a share.

A state senator said that just because a private electric line caused the wine country fire does not let the utility off the hook for the role of its equipment in other devastating fires in the state.

State Sen. Bill Dodd, a

Napa Democrat, cited systemwide issues plaguing California's largest utility.

Lawmakers are under pressure to find a solution that addresses utility reform and compensates wildfire victims.

"This underscores the idea that we all have a role to play in wildfire prevention," said Dodd a frequent critic of PG&E, who noted that the company has already been found at fault for more than a dozen other Northern California wildfires.

PG&E said in a Jan. 2 court filing that it believed a handyman performing unlicensed electrical work started the wine country fire.

In the report released Thursday by the state, one witness reported seeing a transformer explode. Another reported seeing the fire approach a PG&E power pole.

BRIEFLY

High heat but no record: 2018 was 4th warmest year on Earth

WASHINGTON (AP) — While Earth was a tad cooler last year than the last couple of years, it still was the fourth warmest on record, a new analysis shows.

With the partial U.S. government shutdown, federal agency calculations for last year's temperatures are delayed. But independent scientists at Berkeley Earth calculate that last year's average temperature was 58.93 degrees.

That's 1.39 degrees warmer than the average from 1951 to 1980 and about 2.09 degrees warmer than pre-industrial times.

It's likely other temperature measuring groups will agree on 2018's ranking since they had it at fourth hottest through November, said Berkeley Earth climate scientist Zeke Hausfather. The Japanese Meteorological Agency has already calculated it at fourth. Record-keeping started in 1850.

Only 2016, 2017 and 2015 were warmer than last year, with only small differences among them. That was mostly because of natural yearly weather variations like El Niño and La Niña, Hausfather said. He said it would be foolish to call last year's slight dip a cooling trend.

Rare pangolins languish in China wildlife rescue system

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Chinese police found them in the trunk of a smuggler's car, 33 of the trafficked pangolins — endangered scaly mammals from southern China — were still alive, wrapped in plastic bags soaked with their own urine.

But the fate of the creatures — whose scales are worth nearly their weight in silver on the black market — was not a happy one. Every last pangolin died in government captivity within a few months of the August 2017 seizure.

A pioneering environmental nonprofit in Beijing has launched an investigation, called "counting pangolins," to figure out what happens to such animals recovered from the illegal wildlife trade. Its findings so far highlight discrepancies between environmental laws and outcomes.

China is hardly unique. The number of environmental laws on the books worldwide has increased 38-fold since 1972, according to an exhaustive U.N. Environment report released Thursday. But the political will and capacity to enforce those laws often lags — undermining global efforts to curb issues like wildlife trafficking, air pollution and climate change, the report found.

"The law doesn't self-ex-

ecute," said Carl Bruch, a study co-author and director of international programs at the Environmental Law Institute in Washington, D.C.

Police say Florida bank attack that killed 5 was random act

SEBRING, Fla. (AP) — Investigators have found no obvious reason why a man accused of fatally shooting five women picked a small-town bank in Florida as the place to carry out his attack, authorities said Thursday.

Zephen Xaver's attack did not appear to be part of a robbery, and he had no apparent connection to the SunTrust branch or the four employees and one customer who were killed, police said.

There was also no evidence that Wednesday's attack was planned, although a former girlfriend said Xaver often talked of killing people.

"We believe it was a random act," Sebring Police Chief Karl Heglund said Thursday at a news conference. "Aside from perhaps driving by and seeing it was a bank, we have no known evidence that he targeted this bank for any particular reason."

That randomness hit Carol Davis, who manages the hair salon and spa next door, hard. If the gunman had driven 10 seconds farther, just one more driveway, the victims would have been her, her staff and her customers.

Florida elections chief resigns when blackface photos emerge

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida's top elections official abruptly resigned Thursday after a newspaper obtained pictures of him in blackface dressed as a Hurricane Katrina victim at a 2005 party.

Secretary of State Michael Ertel, who had been on the job less than three weeks, resigned just hours after he testified about election lawsuits before a state legislative committee.

The Tallahassee Democrat obtained pictures taken at a Halloween party 14 years ago that show Ertel dressed in blackface while wearing earrings, a New Orleans Saints bandanna and fake breasts under a purple T-shirt with "Katrina Victim" written on it. The photos were taken two months after the deadly storm ravaged the Gulf Coast region and eight months after Ertel was appointed Seminole County supervisor of elections. The newspaper hasn't said how it got the photos or identified the source.

Ertel was the Seminole elections supervisor until new Gov. Ron DeSantis picked him last month to take over the department that oversees elections.



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