

Storm darkens Sonoma

By Neal Ross, Index-Tribune Staff Writer

11/12/02 -- When it rains, it pours more than just water - as the high winds with last week's 2.6-inch deluge proved, leaving eastern Sonoma in blackout-fostered candlelight shortly before 9 p.m. Thursday.

"We've kind of determined this was the worst storm since 1998," PG&E spokesman Lloyd Coker said yesterday. "We've had storms with as many customers out, but not as many work locations ... different places where we had to go."

Precise figures for Valley outages were not available from PG&E by presstime.

Coker said nearly 750,000 Bay Area PG&E customers were left in the dark Thursday night, with 33,000 in Sonoma County. He said the majority were restored "very, very quickly," with nearly all Valley customers back on-line by late Saturday.

Coker added that widespread, wind-downed service lines caused numerous "pocket outages" for isolated customers as late as Sunday.

"That was the difficult part, getting to them," Coker said, adding that tree crews were out in force this weekend along with line workers. "I think, all in all, we really stepped up to bat."

Sonoma Valley's Thursday storm saga began at 3:40 p.m., when firefighters from the Valley of the Moon district were dispatched to Arnold Drive at Sobre Vista Road to cope with a wind-cracked eucalyptus.

"A big branch that broke off was hanging above the wires, in other trees," said VOM fire Capt. John Franceschi. He said firefighters remained on scene for about an hour before a county road crew arrived. The incident closed Arnold Drive between Agua Caliente and Madrone roads until repairs could be effected.

"They didn't want that limb to come down and land on top of a car," Franceschi said.

At 8:50 p.m., the power to half of Sonoma flickered four times and came back on three times, according to several witnesses. Around the same time, emergency dispatchers went into action, sending help to a barrage of storm-related incidents.

Between 9 p.m. and 9:20 p.m., the Sonoma, Valley of the Moon and Schell-Vista fire departments responded to reports of downed and/or arcing wires on Carriger Road, Arnold Drive, East Napa Street, Fifth Street East, Patten Street and Napa Road; two different locations each on First Street West and Second Street East; and a gas leak on Church Street. No other damage or injuries were reported.

Sonoma was mostly dark east of Second Street West and north of West and East MacArthur Street. City Hall was steeped in shadow as were the streets north, east and south of Sonoma Plaza,

including Broadway. Candlelight winked from storm-darkened restaurants and the occasional eastside home.

In the northern Valley, the Kenwood, Glen Ellen and Mayacamas fire departments also had their hands full. Kenwood fire Capt. Daren Bellach said that a tree went into some power lines on Adobe Canyon Road between 8:30 and 9 p.m. Thursday, with another crashing across the 2500 block of Bristol Road around 10 a.m. Sunday, closing the street until 5 p.m.

"The power's still out - they're fixing it as we speak," Bellach said yesterday morning.

Glen Ellen fire engineer Dan Pierce said his department took two calls Thursday night, the first - at 8:47 p.m. - concerning arcing wires in the 13500 block of Arnold Drive. At 9:21 p.m., a tree downed phone lines in the 6500 block of Sonoma Mountain Road and blocked traffic in both directions - "which isn't that hard to do on Sonoma Mountain Road," Pierce said.

Mayacamas chief Gene Reed said a tree went down around 9:30 p.m. on Trinity Road near the Sonoma/ Napa county line.

"Our guys were there until after 1 (a.m.), until PG&E could get up there the next day," Reed said. "It was sometime Friday mid-morning before they finally opened up the road."

County dispatch manager Steve Bell said yesterday that Thursday's heavy weather nearly doubled the amount of traffic coordinated by the Santa Rosa-based command center.

"We handle routinely about 110 to 125 9-1-1 calls per day - we had 209 that day," Bell said, adding that less than a dozen people were coordinating Thursday night's response.

"Certainly in those kinds of situations, a lot of balls are being juggled - the folks in here understand that the folks in the field have a lot of work to do," Bell said. "We're lucky to have such a group of people."