

# Facing California's climate future, from a forgotten past

BY TONY EARLEY, CHAIRMAN & CEO, PG&E CORPORATION

PICTURE A CALIFORNIA pounded by never-ending rains of biblical strength. Our deserts submerged four feet deep. Entire towns washed away. One in every eight homes destroyed. A death toll in the thousands.

That's not some dire prediction. Every one of those things already happened—right here in our backyard—more than 150 years ago. Over the winter of 1861-62, storms fueled by an “atmospheric river” wreaked unimaginable havoc, destroying 25 percent of the economy and driving a state built by the Gold Rush into bankruptcy—a disaster that came to be known as the “California Megaflood.”

Extreme weather events aren't new. But climate science tells us such episodes are increasing in intensity, and that rising global temperatures are making them more frequent and less predictable.

Thanks to the agreement struck in Paris last year, the EPA's Clean Power Plan, and work toward a regional partnership championed by Governor Jerry Brown, we have begun taking real steps to contain the climate crisis.

But that won't change the fact that some degree of warming is already unavoidable, accompanied by a higher incidence of drought, flooding, heat waves and wildfires.

The melting of the polar ice sheets means that in the Bay Area alone, more than 200 square miles of land are vulnerable to sea level rise. The Bay Area Council estimates that more powerful tidal surges from a modern superstorm lasting just a few days could cause \$10.5 billion in economic damage.

Some cities and counties already have sophisti-



CHRIS MARTIN

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cated planning efforts underway. Others are just getting started, or face budget constraints.

Infrastructure companies are also working to prepare, along with businesses. But none of us can do it alone—the public and private sector need to band together, and engage at every level.

For our part, PG&E has joined the U.S. Department of Energy in a partnership to share research results and best practices. We've committed \$250,000 in shareholder funds to protect and restore wetland buffers around San Francisco

Bay through the passage of Measure AA.

And in the coming year, we'll launch the Better Together Resilient Communities grant program to help communities throughout our 70,000 square-mile service area understand, plan for, and respond to climate change risks—particularly in disadvantaged neighborhoods where vulnerability is high and resources are lacking. The grants are designed to produce solutions that others can learn from and adopt.

We see this as a natural extension of PG&E's mission to ensure the sustain-

ability of the basic infrastructure our economy relies upon, and which fuels its vitality.

But it is also a recognition that the consequences of climate change come with no fixed address—just a shared future, and a common fate.

The willingness to look that future in the eye, and make the decisions needed to change it, is our best hope for keeping the horrors of the California Megaflood in the history books, where they belong.

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