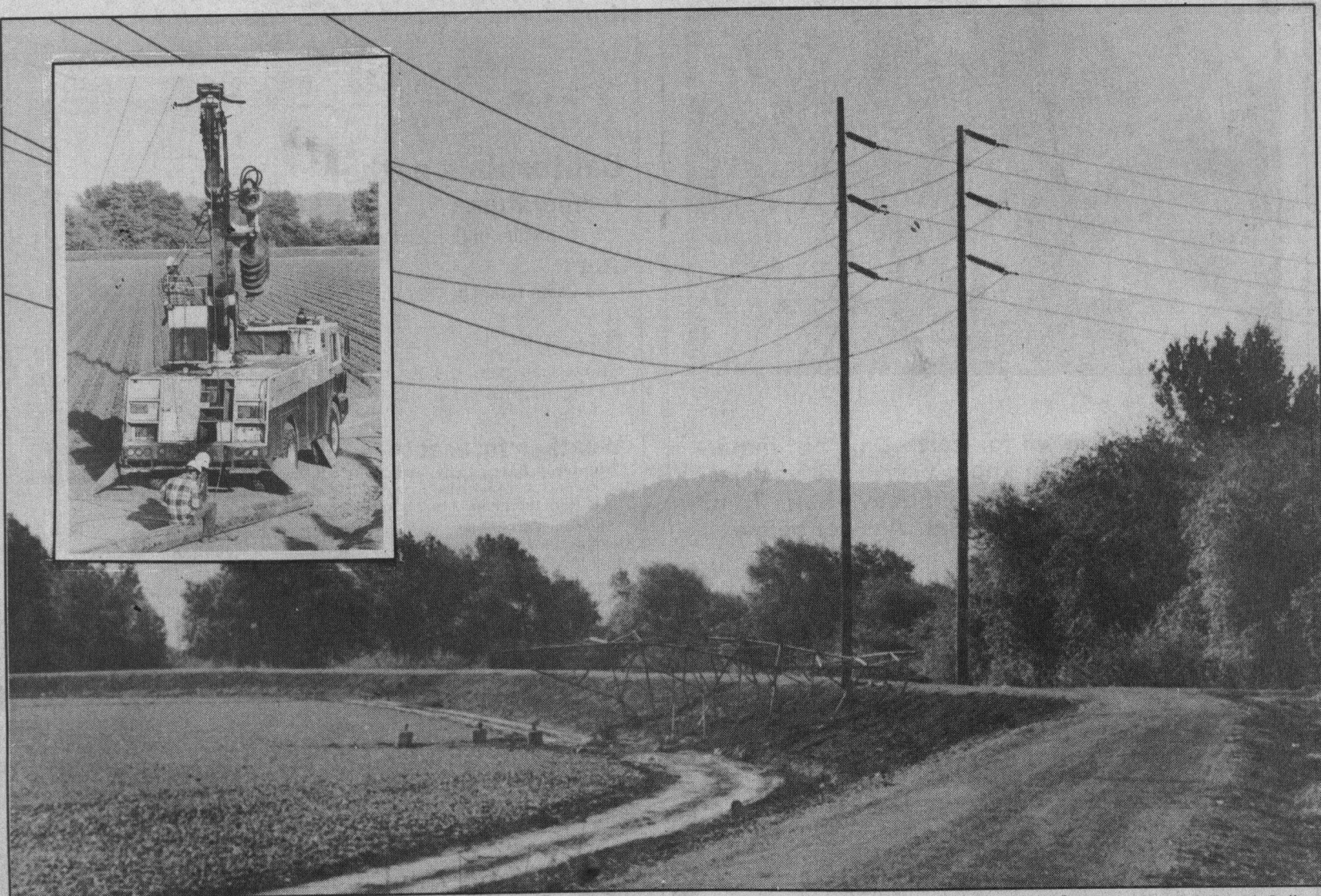


Powerless

What the vandalism cost Watsonville



Mike McCollum

By this morning, two wooden poles were up in place of the toppled tower along the Pajaro River. Inset: PG&E crews worked yesterday to get the poles in place.

Hard-hit community takes it on the chin again

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

The countywide power outage yesterday — caused at least in part by a previously unknown group of "eco-terrorists" calling themselves "Earth Night Action Group" — caused local businesses to lose customers and frozen food products, forced hundreds of food-processing workers to go without a day's wages, endangered people on life-support systems, and outraged just about everybody.

Most of Santa Cruz County and parts of Monterey County were cut off from power early yesterday morning when the bolts at the base of a 100-foot-tall steel transmission tower next to the Pajaro River were unscrewed. PG&E was able to restore power by 5 a.m.

from another source. But at 9 a.m., the county became isolated from major transmission lines coming from a statewide grid when lines were severed from a Morgan Hill transmission tower.

Power was not restored to all residents in Watsonville and Aptos until 10:47 last night.

A PG&E spokesman said this morning that crews had still not determined exactly what caused the severed lines at the Morgan Hill tower, which stands in a semi-rural area, he said. It is possible, he said, but not certain, that the 2,000-foot span of charged cable was severed with a gun shot.

Yesterday's outages followed similar, though less serious, problems Sunday. Two wooden power distribution poles were sawn in

two near Watsonville, and one of those caused a two-hour power outage to 92,000 homes and businesses from Watsonville to Santa Cruz.

PG&E estimates it has already lost "tens of thousands of dollars" in equipment and overtime wages, the spokesman said.

Watsonville Community Hospital and Dominican Santa Cruz Hospital switched to emergency back-up generators yesterday, and reported no interruptions or problems for intensive care units and elective surgeries. Dominican spokesman Michael Mahoney, however, said one back-up generator broke at one point, causing about a 30-minute power outage to some wings of the hospital.

Mahoney added that several

people had to be brought to the hospital because they depend on respirators or other support systems at home.

"It just heightens the irresponsibility of this act (of sabotage)," he said. "There are people on life support systems in home environments who really need power."

The disruption to daily life, hard on the heels of last week's swarm of aftershocks to the Oct. 17 earthquake, also affected many people's nerves.

Ida Rodgers, a Cabrillo College student and mother of two Watsonville High School students, said this morning that she wouldn't feel secure until the vandals are caught.

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"This isn't some little prank that inconvenienced close to 100,000 people — it's an act of terrorism," she said.

Her children, she said, were dealing with enough trauma already with the main building of the high school being shut down this week because of earthquake damage. She said the trauma of the earthquake is barely healed, and overheard a man in a grocery store say he'd like to go after the perpetrators with a shotgun.

"Watsonville has suffered enough," Rodgers said.

Another Watsonville resident, Marie Devery, said, "I consider myself an environmentalist, but I can't understand someone doing something so destructive (in the name of environmentalism)."

Frozen-food plants in the area reported some loss of vegetables. At Richard A. Shaw Frozen Foods, Jeff Shaw said 400,000 pounds of peas had to be processed at a plant in San Joaquin County or be lost. But, he said, that plant wouldn't have been able to do the job today, and the peas would have been lost.

Shaw also said that tons of spinach had already been cut when the power went out at 9

a.m., and that it all would have been lost if the power hadn't come on late last night.

Most of the plant's 900 workers, he said, had to go home without pay. That probably represents a total of \$75,000 in lost wages, he said.

At Pillsbury-Green Giant, where close to 400 people are currently working, the broccoli that was being processed was lost, according to plant manager Duane Larson. He said there is no overall tally of the cost yet, but the plant paid some workers even though they weren't able to work, adding that to its own financial losses yesterday.