

Blustery winds whip SC County

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Santa Cruz County residents adversely affected by the howling winds that blew in last night can take solace in two things: They are not alone, and the worst is over.

PG&E spokesman Ron Rutkowski said more than 300,000 customers between the Oregon border and Bakersfield have lost power since the winds, blowing in from the northeast and averaging between 40 and 60 mph in some areas, began.

Rutkowski said more than 20,000 were without power between Watsonville and Palo Alto.

"Half of those customers are still without power," Rutkowski said. "A lot of the outages are in the foothills in Santa Cruz and Cupertino on either side of the coast mountain range."

Another PG&E spokesman, Dick Smith, said there are 2,070 customers without power in Santa Cruz County, mostly in the San Lorenzo Valley area. Smith said there are about 270 customers who have lost power in the Watsonville area, mostly near Paulsen Road, and in the Casserly Road and Smith Road areas.

Trees blown down in the gale-force winds are believed to have started a number of small fires in this county and forced road closures for short periods.

The California Department of Forestry in Felton reported that a tree fell across the road at Waterman Gap, near the summit, and started a small brush fire that was quickly contained.

The CDF also reported trees down on Felton Empire Grade Road at an unknown location, and at 7th Avenue and Capitola Road in Live Oak.

CDF Fire Captain Mike Martin said he had crews fighting two wild-land fires in San Mateo County. One is a 20-acre fire one mile north of Half Moon Bay, and the other is an 80-acre fire at Tunitas Creek, about 10 miles south of Half Moon Bay and three miles east of Highway 1.

The Branciforte Fire Protection District reported that a falling tree knocked down a power line to the station and forced the use of a generator.

Branciforte Fire Chief Robert Stoops said a power pole in the district caught fire, and there were crews driving around this morning looking for downed lines.

The Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor reported there have been no incidents other than a few loose lines on docked boats.

Harbor operations assistant Pat Barden said winds are averaging about 30 mph on their meter. "We're recommending that no one go out," she understated.

A National Weather Service spokesman reached by phone in Redwood City said the strongest winds have passed. There has been snow in Paso Robles and rain in San Luis Obispo, but all this area is likely to get is some overcast.

The winds were the result of a strong high-pressure system over the Great Basin east of the Sierra Nevada and a corresponding low-pressure system on the coast.