Power back on for many in South County

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Electricity has been restored to 18,000 customers in Orange County after a massive power outage that impacted up to 5 million people in the United States and Mexico, including a wide swath of South County.

While the widespread outage, which extended from the southern portion of Orange County into San Diego County, Arizona, Baja California and mainland Mexico, was expected to continue overnight, electricity had begun feeding back into the system by late Thursday.

The outage left traffic snarled and businesses closed early. Capistrano Unified School District Officials announced that their campuses would be closed on Friday, while other schools were waiting to see if power would be restored.

The outage was triggered by a "major system disturbance" between Arizona and Southern California that left all San Diego Gas & Electric and a small number of Southern California Edison customers without power.

Authorities say an employee at a substation near Yuma, Arizona may have caused the outage, reportedly while removing a piece of monitoring equipment. Officials said they were investigating why the outage wasn't contained to the Arizona area.

Locally, outages were reported in San Clemente, San Juan Capistrano, Laguna Hills, Dana Point, Coto de Caza, Mission Viejo and parts of Laguna Niguel, officials said.

Power was restored to portions of Mission Viejo and San Clemente on Thursday, but many other Orange County customers remained without electricity.

The San Onofre nuclear plant's two reactor units went into shutdown mode because of the outage at 3:38 p.m., and the shutdown was proceeding safely, spokesman Gil Alexander said.

But plant operators were investigating the reason for the shutdown, an apparent response to "grid factors," he said.

It was not immediately known whether the shutdown was automatic or was started by the plant's operators.

On Thursday night, San Onofre personnel were conducting an inspection of the plant's equipment. They said the plant itself continued to operate in a “safe, stable shutdown condition.”

According to the California Independent System Operator Corp., the outage began when a 500-kilovolt line tripped out of service, cutting the flow of imported power along SDG&E’s major utility connections.

Mike Niggli, chief operating officer of SDG&E, said at a news conference that to his knowledge it was the first time they had lost an entire system.

Electrical flow had returned to the tripped line by late evening but still had to feed back to the substations and to customers, said Allison Zaragoza, an SDG&E spokeswoman.

The California Emergency Management Agency on Thursday night activated the southern Region Emergency
Operations Center in Los Alamitos to monitor the effect of the outage and to help coordinate state resources if needed. State officials asked those affected by the outage to limit their cell phone use and to use landlines only for emergency calls to avoid overloading the system.

The outage came at a time of high utility use due to the recent heat wave.

Inland Orange County saw temperatures in the high 90s over the past three days and a few places tipped over the century mark.

San Diego County also saw significant heat, both inland and on the coast. Ramona and Escondido hit 100, and it was 86 in San Diego, nearly 10 degrees above normal. The heat was made worse by the lack of a marine layer.

But the heat wave should be about over. Temperatures are expected to drop Friday as low-pressure air returns to the coast.

The outage knocked out traffic lights in some areas, causing traffic jams and leading to numerous reports of car crashes.

Long lines of cars backed up at freeway onramps and off ramps, as drivers contended with flashing red signals, and some entered and exited without traffic signals.

Hospitals, as well as police and fire stations, operated on backup generators.

Sheriff’s deputies were posted at key intersections. No major injuries were reported.

Fire crews responded to numerous calls of people trapped in elevators and helped residents who were stuck in homes or businesses, Orange County Fire Authority Capt. Marc Stone said.

Stone urged residents to keep in touch with older family members in the event of a longer outage. Utility officials suggested that anyone with a personal family emergency plan to activate them now.

“Check on the elderly, and on neighbors you know who need assistance,” Stone said.

Although most of Capistrano Unified School District’s 56 campuses were affected by the power outage, the outage began after the end of the school day, so students weren’t directly impacted Thursday, said district spokesman Marcus Walton.

JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano – has announced it will be closed Friday if power is not restored by 6:30 a.m. Eric Stroupe, JSerra’s vice president of curriculum and instruction, said in a posting on the school website Thursday that classes were scheduled to resume Monday.

Santa Margarita Catholic High School in Rancho Santa Margarita reported on its website Thursday night that power already had been restored.

"The power is on at SMCHS. We hope those without it have their power restored soon. Keep cool!" a posting at 6:13 p.m. said.

While some streets and freeways were packed, many businesses and parking lots were empty.

At Plaza de la Paz shopping center in Laguna Niguel, almost no cars were in the usually busy parking lot.

Generators at Target kept registers working as well as a handful of lights. Locals stopped for last-minute snacks or to buy candles.

Tracy Thompson of Laguna Niguel said the outage was keeping her from cooking.

"I'm just worried it's going to melt totally the frozen food in the freezer," she said.

Will and Destiny Isenberg of Laguna Niguel stopped for candles after hearing the outage might last overnight. Traffic had lengthened his commute from Camp Pendleton to two hours, and he was waiting to hear if his
work Friday would be canceled due to the outage.

"We got lucky it's cooled off," he said.

Doris Straub of Aliso Viejo gets her power from Edison, most of whose customers were not affected by the outage. She still had to fight traffic, though, and witnessed one near-crash.

"This got us by surprise," she said.

In San Clemente, Tony Carbonara, stood in the patio outside his darkened restaurant, Carbonara Trattoria Italiana, at what normally would be the start of the dinner rush.

“We are just having a few drinks, and then we are going home,” he said as his staff huddled around him.

Carbonara said he had heard that the power wouldn’t be back on in his area until late Thursday night or Friday morning.

“Plus, we can’t watch football tonight,” he said, laughing. “Let’s have a barbecue.”

At San Clemente Gym, personal trainer Chelsea Cruz stayed open during the afternoon, despite most of her clients being stuck in traffic.

“We have no music, all of our electrical equipment, like treadmills, doesn’t work. None of the fans,” Cruz said. “No one is coming in, and I have to close at seven, so all my evening clients can’t come in either.”

Next door, the managers of Ole’s Tavern, a bar frequented by local Green Bay Packers fans, were preparing to close down, their plans for a football kickoff party ended due to the outage.

“We had bratwurst, potato salad, we were going to have the whole nine yards going on,” said Karen Nielsen, the bar’s manager. "It's a bummer, but things could have been worse, like the fires where people were losing their homes. We are just inconvenienced.”

Register reporters Claudia Koerner and Scott Martindale, as well as the Associated Press, contributed to this article.

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