The 2020 fire season has already started, and we cannot repeat the mistakes of past fire seasons. PG&E recently pled guilty to 84 counts of manslaughter after 84 people were killed when a derelict PG&E transmission line sparked the 2018 Camp Fire. The 2019 fire seasons saw widespread public safety power shutoffs (PSPS events), most notably PG&E's seven-day outage in late October, over the course of which 941,217 customer meters–serving nearly 3 million people–were without power.

Earlier this month, the Public Utilities Commission voted to approve a suite of new requirements designed to rapidly increase the resiliency and reliability of California's electric grid for the 2020 fire season. The Commission's decision is the first to come out of its microgrids proceeding, which was initiated in response to Senate Bill 1339, which requires the Commission to develop guidelines, service standards, and tariffs to encourage widespread development of microgrids–small portions of the grid that can be powered and operated independently when the larger grid is de-energized. One of the reasons that 2019 outages were so widespread is a lack of resiliency in the grid–when PG&E decided to de-energize a high-risk transmission line, everyone served by that transmission line lost power. Microgrids can prevent this from happening–even when major transmission lines are de-energized, customers served by a microgrid can disconnect from the larger grid and power themselves.

The Commission's decision adopts several requirements for the state's investor-owned utilities in order to improve utility coordination with local and tribal governments and reduce technical barriers to implementing microgrids. The California Environmental Justice Alliance, represented by the UC Berkeley Environmental Law Clinic and Communities for a Better Environment, advocated on behalf of environmental justice communities across the state to ensure that the Commission's nascent microgrids policy will provide benefits to disadvantaged communities, who have the fewest resources to adapt to power shutoffs and can realize outsized benefits from microgrids.

Importantly, CEJA also advocated strongly to reshape the proposal put forth by PG&E, which initially included the procurement of permanent natural gas plants and a fleet of mobile diesel generators, which would only add to the disproportionate pollution burdens borne by environmental justice communities. CEJA and other parties pointed out the irony of relying on fossil fuel resources to mitigate a wildfire crisis caused in large part by the burning of fossil fuels.Ultimately, PG&E's plan was pared back to remove plans for new gas plants, and include temporary diesel

generation only for the 2020 fire season, with a robust transparency and reporting requirement for PG&E’s use of those generators.

The Commission’s recent decision is an important first step to increase the resiliency of our electric grid, to prevent devastating loss of life, and to avoid life-threatening power outages.