

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 21, 2020

The Honorable Ajit V. Pai
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

Over the last week, our state has experienced widespread rolling blackouts and wildfires. Hundreds of thousands of Californians lost power as a result of the rolling blackouts,¹ and additional rolling blackouts remain possible.² Starting this past Sunday, California experienced a historic lightning siege, with nearly 11,000 strikes over 72 hours that sparked at least 367 wildfires—with the largest concentration in Northern California.³ Some of these fires are still burning and remain largely uncontained.

We are concerned about how the wildfires and rolling blackouts may be impacting the ability of our constituents and all Californians to stay connected in these emergencies, especially given that these events are taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on news reports, it appears that the wildfire blazes impacted cell towers in at least one of the lightning complex wildfires (the LNU Lightning Complex Fires).⁴ Communications outages mean that people are unable to call 9-1-1, let their loved ones know that they are safe, or receive lifesaving alerts, which may include information about alternative wildfire evacuation routes or other information specific to evacuations during the pandemic.

We strongly urge and expect your agency, which is charged with overseeing our nation's communications networks to promote public safety, to be taking all possible steps to monitor the situation and help ensure that Californians stay connected during this time. Accordingly, we request that you provide us with a briefing as soon as possible regarding the following:

¹ *Californians Experience Blackouts During Heat Wave*, KCRA, August 15, 2020, available at <https://www.kcra.com/article/californians-experience-rolling-blackouts-during-heat-wave/33610508>.

² *California Escapes More Rolling Blackouts. But for how Long?* The Mercury News, August 19, 2020, available at <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/08/19/threat-of-rolling-blackouts-continues-in-california-as-heat-wave-drag-on/>.

³ *Firefighters Ready to Battle Into Night, Cal Fire to All Residents of California: "Be Ready To Go,"* The Mercury News, August 19, 2020, available at <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/08/19/with-367-wildfires-raging-cal-fire-to-all-citizens-of-california-be-ready-to-go/>.

⁴ *Wildfire Threat: Bay Area Cell Phone, Internet Service Could Go Out Too*, San Francisco Chronicle, August 19, 2020, available at <https://www.sfchronicle.com/california-wildfires/article/Wildfire-threat-Bay-Area-cell-phone-internet-15495592.php>.

- Wildfire and rolling blackout-related communications outages in California that have been reported to your agency since August 14, 2020;
- Steps your agency is taking to monitor the impact of the wildfires and rolling blackouts on communications networks;
- Steps your agency is taking to reach out to and work with the state and communications providers;
- Cases in which Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) were used to issue warnings or other information related to the wildfires in California;
- To what extent your agency is working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state and local officials, and communications providers to ensure that the WEA system is used appropriately to protect the public during these wildfires; and
- Any other actions your agency is taking related to the wildfires and rolling backouts in California.

Thank you for your attention in this important matter.

Sincerely



JERRY MCNERNEY
Member of Congress



ANNA G. ESHOO
Member of Congress



DORIS MATSUI
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Michael O’Rielly, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Brendan Carr, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Geoffrey Starks, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission