

Telecom giant facing huge post-fire restoration project

By: North County Times wire services

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SAN DIEGO - This fall's Southland wildfire catastrophe left the region's main telephone service provider with the largest restoration job in its 120-year history, the firm reported today.

Engineers with SBC California, formerly Pacific Bell, have completed their assessment of the damage the disastrous blazes did, concluding that well over a million feet of fiber and copper cable and more than 900 telephone poles were destroyed.

In San Diego County, more than 19,000 customers remain without phone service.

The telecommunication giant's workers, including many brought in from other parts of the state, have already completed the following facilities and service restorations, according to SBC officials:

- n More than 130,000 feet of fiber cable have been replaced, out of an estimated 165,000 feet destroyed;

- n More than 127,000 feet of copper cable have been replaced, out of an estimated 979,000 destroyed;

- n About 260 telephone poles have been replaced, out of an estimated 936 burned;

- n Temporary phone service has been restored to the entire community of Crest by temporary radio microwave towers connecting the area to an El Cajon central office;

- n Service has been restored to more than 12,000 customers in the past several days.

The widespread fire crises "damaged our outside plant network like nothing before in our history," said Chuck Smith, president and chief executive officer of SBC California.

"In a matter of days, we're replacing a network that took many years to construct," he added. "This is an unprecedented effort, and we're dedicating every resource necessary to complete the job."

All central office facilities are back on full commercial power. At the height of the crisis, seven offices were operating on backup generators.

Also, service has been restored to 99 remote terminals, though 18 others remain out of service, and one is still operating on auxiliary power.

The firm said it has undertaken an aggressive program to reach out to victims of the fires.

The company has extended an offer of waiving installation charges and/or monthly recurring fees to fire victims to 18 months, subject to regulatory approval.

These services include access lines, call forwarding, remote call forwarding and remote access to call forwarding, as well as Message Center and voice-mail programs from SBC Messaging.

Deferred payments for previous invoices also will be granted for victims.

In addition, SBC California is providing special priority response to process account changes and coordinate free services for fire victims.

For those services, residential customers should call SBC California at (800) 310-2355, or after business office hours, at (877) 722-8033. Business customers can call (800) 750-BELL.

The company continues to staff the victim assistance centers at Scripps Ranch, Alpine and Ramona to talk directly with its customers.

To date, more than 500 customers have received direct assistance at the "one-stop shop" locations, with transactions ranging from setting up free services to suspending accounts.