

Lights coming on at Kirkwood; lifts could run Sunday

Updated Jan. 2 at 4:51pm.

By Kathryn Reed

Lights are slowly returning to Kirkwood and lifts are expected to operate Sunday after a fire destroyed the power plant at Kirkwood on New Year's Day.

Power was restored to the village area in the late afternoon Saturday, with lifts and some residences to have electricity as the evening wears on. All residences are expected to have power by Sunday morning.

"In the next 12 to 14 hours we expect to have everything online," Tim Cohee, said at 4:30pm Saturday. Cohee is senior vice president at Kirkwood.

He said close to 500 people are still in the Kirkwood valley.

A fire in the power house the afternoon of New Year's Day reduced the building to ash, caused thousands of people staying in the resort community to spend the night without lights or heat, and left many hopeful the days of being off the grid are numbered.

Kirkwood Mountain Utilities provides power to the entire Kirkwood Valley, which has less than 700 residences with only a few dozen year-round residents; the ski resort that straddles the El Dorado-Alpine-Amador county border; and lodging facilities that had a few thousand people staying over the New Year weekend.



Kirkwood's
power plant
goes up in
flames Jan. 1.
Photo/News 10-
ABC

Cohee said the delay in getting the power back on was an L-shaped coupling on one of the 300 transformers also went out. It took a while to find it.

Kirkwood employees bought lanterns and flashlights for those left behind. Cohee said it was like a Western movie watching people walk around with lanterns.

The plant that housed six diesel generators is a total loss, with damages in the millions of dollars. The valley usually used three generators at any one time during the winter, with the others considered backup. They are beyond repair.

Then there is the loss in tourism dollars. On New Year's Day lifts were closed two hours early. Those people were offered a 50 percent off voucher on a day of skiing. Lodging guests could get a full refund of 20 percent off they stayed in the dark.

The two-week Christmas-New Year's period is when cash registers go cha-ching at Tahoe resorts. Losing part of this last weekend could add up to big bucks.

Plus, the resort was feeding people who stayed – all gratis.

About 300 people took advantage of free cat skiing on

Saturday. Tubing, snowshoeing and cross country skiing was also available to those who were at Kirkwood. Breakfast, lunch and dinner on Saturday were also provided.

This is not the first time fire has erupted at the facility near the decrepit employee housing structure – which survived unscathed.

In November 2004, a blast at the plant caused about \$100,000 in damage, had skiers stranded on the chairlifts and created the necessity for another backup generator to be brought in.

The New Year's Day fire is significantly worse. However, no skiers were stranded. The resort closed a couple hours early when smoke was seen in the plant.

Officials thought everything was fine when the smoke dissipated, but then the roof caught fire. It was made of wood, while the walls were brick.

Cohee said a filter on one of the generators created so much smoke you couldn't see inside.

"It burned for over three hours. You could see incredible flames," Cohee said.

Caterpillar brought in two more "Cat in the Boxes" by 9pm Friday. This makes three at the resort.

"We have more portable power than we've had fixed power," Cohee said of the diesel units look like 18-wheelers.

Assuming power can be distributed, Kirkwood plans to use the Cat in the Boxes through the ski season, anticipating only needing one as summer rolls around.

Cohee said construction on a new plant could begin in May.

"We will have a chance to modernize (the plant)," Cohee said. "At the point we get on the grid, that becomes the backup

plant if we lose line power.”

In March, the draft environment impact report and statement will be released by the U.S. Forest Service and Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District for the potential authorization of a 50-year special use permit for the construction, use and maintenance of a KMPUD power line connecting the electrical grid near Salt Springs with Kirkwood Meadows.

The line would connect with an existing Pacific Gas & Electric line. The new line would likely be on Eldorado National Forest land.

The final EIR/EIS could be released in October.

“We would much rather be on the grid. It’s much cleaner more reliable and the power is much less expensive at the end of the day,” Cohee said.