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Charges of Greenwashing at Pacific Gas and Electric

Denise T. Ogden
Penn State University - Lehigh Valley

Shruti Gupta
Penn State University – Abington

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INTRODUCTION

The advertising appeared everywhere along the streets of San Francisco. The bright lime-green posters were designed to spread the benefits of "going green". Messages like *Green is 4 wheels on the road versus 400*, *Green is a city with country air*, *Green is so crazy it just might work*, *Green is yellow* (copy touts benefits of solar energy), *Green is brown* (copy supports biomass recycling), *Green is blue* (copy explains water power benefits). Initially the ads were eye-catching to Aliza Wasserman, an environmental activist and concerned citizen. Then she discovered that the sponsor of the public relations campaign was Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) Company. She believed the electric company was investing money in the campaign to cover up their past environmental offenses and stop acceptance of a controversial decision to allow San Francisco to buy energy from other companies. According to Wasserman, "Energy companies invested in old, dirty technology should not be advertising that they are green…it's inherently greenwashing."[1] She did something about her concerns and founded Green Guerillas against Greenwash (GGAG), an organization that exposed PG&E's poor environmental record.

Contrary to the opinions of GGAG, PG&E believes they have a strong environmental record and have dismissed the charges of greenwashing. Darlene Chiu, Manager of Corporate Communications at PG&E, stated that the letsgreenwashthiscity.org site contains incorrect information and other misinterpreted information about the company. She believes the company is trying to do what's good for the environment and the "Let's Green This City" campaign illustrated those efforts.[2] It is difficult to decide which side is right when there are many issues to consider.

BACKGROUND

Incorporated in California in 1905, the Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) Company is one of the largest combination natural gas and electric utilities in the United States. The company is based in San Francisco and is a subsidiary of the PG&E Corporation. In an effort to make San Francisco the "greenest city in the USA" in Nov. 2006, PG&E started a public relations campaign called "Let's Green This City". The website for the campaign is www.letsgreenthiscity.com. The site provides the residents of San Francisco with information on different practices to support the environment. Though the campaign was well-received by the citizens of San Francisco, there were many who felt that PG&E was engaging in "greenwashing" – using public relations to project an image of a concerned corporate citizen as a cover up to hide the destructive environmental record of the company.

Opponents also believed that another motivation of PG&E for the "Let's Green This City" campaign was to stop the final acceptance of a Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) program by attempting to appear more environmentally friendly. Community Choice Aggregation would break PG&E's monopoly and support market competition. Although state laws prohibited PG&E from actively campaigning against aggregation, consumer advocacy groups argued that the company engaged in high profile "green" projects to gain support and prevent the final acceptance of the CCA plan.

In response to PG&E's involvement in the "Let's Green This City" campaign, Aliza Wasserman and other detractors of PG&E, started a website called "Let's Greenwash This City", with the corresponding website, www.letsgreenwashthiscity.com. The website details the poor environmental record of PG&E.

PG&E

Headquartered in San Francisco, PG&E provides natural gas and electricity to approximately 15 million people throughout a 70,000-square-mile service area in northern and central California. PG&E owns and operates one operating nuclear power plant (Diablo Canyon Power Plant), a natural gas-fired power plant, and an extensive hydroelectric system. Two plants are no longer in operation: The Humboldt Bay Unit 3 nuclear plant was shut down in 1976. The Hunters Point (fossil) plant closed in May 2006.

The predecessor to PG&E, The San Francisco (SFG&E) Gas Company was founded in 1852 by Peter and James Donahue. Over the years this company merged with rival companies until PG&E was formed in 1905 through a merger of the SFG&E Co. and the California Gas and Electric Corporation. In 1997, PG&E Corporation became the parent company for the PG&E Company. In 2007 the company had approximately 20,000 employees. PG&E is regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission.

The Western Power Crisis and Financial Difficulties

In May 2000 electricity prices in the West significantly increased resulting in the California Electricity Crisis also known as the Western Power Crisis of 2000 and 2001. Due to price controls in effect, utility companies had to pay more for electricity than what they could charge customers which resulted in the PG&E bankruptcy filing in April 2001.

Several market conditions lead to the Western Power Crisis. First, the economic growth in the early 2000s lead to a significant increase in demand for electricity, which far exceeded the equipment and generation capacity of the utility companies. In addition, a restructuring of the electric utility industry in California led to miscalculations in the price that combined with the volatility of the wholesale market led to unprofitable operations for the utility companies. Wholesale prices exceeded retail prices and the California utilities were unable to pass on the higher wholesale prices to customers due to regulated fixed pricing. An environmental factor that compounded the market conditions was a severe water shortage in the Northwest Region that impaired hydropower generation capabilities.[3]

The impact of the crisis was so great that investor-owned utilities, such as PG&E, could not recover from its ensuing financial problems. The result of the crisis was rolling blackouts, exorbitant increases in rates and a tax funded bailout of the utility.[4] PG&E filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization in April 2001 with $9 billion in electricity debt.[5] After paying $10.2 billion to hundreds of creditors, PG&E emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy in April 2004. Over the years, PG&E has slowly regained its financial strength. The parent company, PG&E Corp., was ranked 196 on the 2007 *Fortune 500* list with over $12.5 Billion in revenue and profits of $991 million. In 2008 the company was ranked 200 on the list with revenue of over $13.2 Billion and profits of over $1 Billion.[6]

"LET'S GREEN THIS CITY" CAMPAIGN

In November 2006, PG&E launched a multi-million dollar public relations campaign called "Lets Green This City". According to the website www.letsgreenthiscity.com, the campaign was "a partnership between PG&E and the people of San Francisco." It was part of PG&E's goal to become the nation's greenest utility and to help San Francisco become the greenest city in the nation.[7]

According to Darlene Chiu, Manager of Corporate Communications at PG&E, the "Let's Green this City" campaign was a group effort which came about because Peter Darbee, CEO, realized the urgency of climate change and wanted to do something about it. The campaign is a call to action.[8] Darbee wanted to make green part of PG&E's image. He is a member of the United States Climate Action Partnership which is a group of business leaders who are committed to bring the issue of global warming and climate change to the attention of governments around the world.

According to Peter Darby, "What leaders do is they identify the right thing to do, and they do it early. And that's why PG&E's view is we're stepping out. We've been the leader in industry, way out in front and sometimes taking arrows for it. We believe the nation should step out on this, do the right thing and then convince others in the world that this is urgent and important and they need to follow our lead."[9]

Mekanism, a creative studio, and the advertising agency, Venables Bell & Partners, created the integrated media campaign which aimed to educate consumers on ways to support the environment. The interactive website consisted of an online manual which provided consumers with tips to conserve energy at home. There were also ten live-action and animated short films on green issues ranging from a worm that shows the benefits of composting to a flock of winged compact florescent bulbs (CFL) flying through a dreamlike landscape. Articles and downloadable fact sheets were also available on the website. The creators of the campaign integrated entertainment with education. The online campaign complimented the city-wide print campaign designed by Venables Bell & Partners.[10] In addition, the website (www.letsgreenthiscity.com) listed actions that PG&E had taken to help green the city:

- Invested $5 million in new solar installations in San Francisco
- Investigated ways to harness the San Francisco Bay tidal current to create pollution-free energy

- Supported the incubation of green energy companies
- Instituted a ClimateSmart program which allowed consumers to direct part of their power bill towards an initiative limiting greenhouse gases
- Expanded the Solar Schools program

According to Darlene Chiu, PG&E had also contacted its partner companies to explain the campaign. Many companies expressed interest and joined the effort immediately while others were added after the campaign began. The company has received many accolades on the campaign. The "Let's Green this City" campaign has also spurred interest in similar initiatives in other cities where PG&E has held symposiums to help these communities to develop similar programs. One of the results of the campaign has been the Energy Watch program, a partnership between the San Francisco Department of the Environment and PG&E. The Energy Watch partnership provided incentive programs, training, education, and technical assistance for small businesses and residential customers.[11]

Charges of Greenwashing

After the "Let's Green This City" campaign came out, Aliza Wasserman, a former corporate responsibility consultant, along with a group of concerned citizens formed *Green Guerrillas Against Greenwash* (GGAG) in 2006. The group consisted of four to six main organizers and about 100 other supporters. They were the first to protest PG&E's sponsorship of the "Lets Green This City" campaign as evidence of greenwashing, which is when a company uses public relations to project an image of a concerned corporate citizen to hide the company's destructive environmental history. The leaders of the group believed that PG&E launched the campaign to appear environmentally friendly and as a tactic to divert public and media attention from its negative environmental record.

Below is a sample of a greenwash poster the group distributed:

Wasserman along with the other members of GGAG also launched the www.letsgreenwashthiscity.org website to expose the poor environmental record of

PG&E by posting information about the company and the impact felt by the regional communities. Here are some highlights of the information from the website (accessed June 2007):[12]:

- PG&E's power mix includes less than 1% solar energy and only 2% wind, both of which are examples of renewable resources that are environmentally friendly.

- Bulk of the power produced by PG&E comes from fossil fuel (45%) and nuclear (24%) resources. Both resources have been shown to be detrimental to the environment than other renewable alternatives.

- Feasibility studies found that the San Francisco Bay Area had solar and wind capacity to meet 50% of San Francisco's energy by 2017...without raising customer costs.

- PG&E aimed to increase its renewable energy by the legally mandated minimum of 1% a year. The increase would be achieved through contracts with other companies (outsourcing).

- PG&E praised itself for its work on energy efficiency and its initiative in 2007 when the company distributed CFLs to customers - when all of that was legally required and funded by tax money (the public goods charged on consumer's monthly bills.

- PG&E lobbied for nuclear energy to be the 'green' solution to climate change, despite the fact that there was no safe solution in sight for the nuclear waste it leaves behind for 240,000 years.

GGAG contended that the "Let's Green This City" campaign intentionally coincided with the time when the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (similar to a City Council) had voted on the Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) policy. According to GGAG, the timing was an attempt by PG&E to be viewed favorably by the citizens and thereby prevent the passage of CCA. During the same time when the "Let's Green This City" campaign was in full momentum, GGAG organized public demonstrations and engaged in guerrilla ad-busting to expose PG&E's actions against green legislation. Wasserman stated during the first few demonstrations held by GGAG, PG&E representatives approached the group to initiate dialog between GGAG and the company. However, GGAG had decided to stay firm and not engage in any dialog with PG&E until the latter had agreed to policy changes to generate 51% of its electricity from renewable energy sources.[13]

In response, Darlene Chiu, of PG&E, expressed her frustration at GGAG's refusal to meet with representatives of PG&E. Chiu believed a meeting between GGAG and PG&E may have cleared up some of the misunderstandings.[14]

San Francisco Supervisor, Tom Ammiano agrees that PG&E has engaged in greenwashing. According to Ammiano, "They're trying to co-opt the whole idea of public power and community choice."[15] Ross Mirkarimi, another member of the Board of Supervisors who supported Community Choice Aggregation made the following comment about of PG&E's initiatives to offer grants and donations to community groups, "I think there is also this expectation that those neighborhood community groups show a loyalty to PG&E that also potentially translates into not aligning with any effort than could suggest public power, or could suggest community choice aggregation."[16]

COMMUNITY CHOICE AGGREGATION

As a result of the Western Power Crisis, San Franciscans wanted a change in electricity management. Proposition F and Measure I, which would have created local ownership of transmission, distribution and some generation of electricity, were defeated by San Franciscans in 2001.[17] PG&E spent $1.28 million to defeat the passage of Proposition F and Measure I.[18] Another proposition (Proposition D) that was introduced in the San Francisco City Council in November 2002, which would have created municipalized public power and closed the Bayview Hunters Point plant was also defeated by popular vote. It has been suggested that PG&E spent $2.1 million to defeat the Proposition D compared to $50,000 spent by supporters of the Proposition.[19]

Despite the failure of the above propositions that sought to change electricity management for the San Francisco County, California's Community Choice Law was enacted in September 2002 (also known as Community Choice Aggregation). The law paved the way for regionalization of electricity markets which is accomplished through Community Choice Aggregation (CCA). In traditional state-regulated systems, the Public Utilities set rates and make portfolio decisions. Investor-owned corporations own the wires and power plants and run the administration of utilities. Utilities receive a guaranteed rate of return based on a fixed percentage of their operating costs. Profits are greater when more power is consumed.[20] With Community Choice Aggregation (CCA), municipalities and groups of municipalities (or regions) aggregate customer demand and then bid out electricity from other utility companies on a competitive basis. The companies who bid for the contract are referred to as Electric Service Providers (ESP). The Community Choice Aggregators is a group of people from a community that represent consumers and decide on the power types and requirements for that community. As a result, communities would have the option to convert to cleaner and renewable power sources. Other energy sources could include solar photovoltaic, wind power and tidal power. In essence, with CCA, the city becomes a broker for the consumers and represents their interests in the selection of power. Under CCA, San Francisco would rely on the existing power delivery infrastructure owned and operated by PG&E. At the same time, San Franciscans retain the right to opt-out of CCA and remain with PG&E as their power supplier.[21] Massachusetts, Ohio, New Jersey and Rhode Island have Community Choice laws in existence.

Proponents of the plan believed that community choice would insulate users from volatile natural gas prices, assist in closing dysfunctional power plants that may contribute to cancer and other diseases, and make San Francisco a leader in environmental stewardship. Dozens of environmental and public good advocates have supported CCA including Sierra Club, Green Party, Women's Energy Matters, Greenpeace, League of Young Voters, Local Power and the Senior Action Network.

According to Paul Fenn, author of California's Community Choice Law,

> ‘Throughout the state, municipalities view Community Choice not merely as a vehicle for finding cheaper supply, but an opportunity to invest in the long-term reliability, stability and sustainability of their energy supply. This represents both an unprecedented opportunity for new business development in new energy technologies and distributed generation, and a challenge for ESPs, vendors, integrators, service companies, and financial institutions to form new consortia, subcontracting relationships and partnerships to answer this new opportunity.”[22]

In a 2005 feasibility study of CCA, Navigant Consulting used three general criteria to assess the benefits of CCA: potential for reduced electricity rates, the ability to increase utilization of renewable energy, and enhanced local control/rate stability of electricity. Other potential benefits of CCA as described in the report included the following:[23]

- Allows a community to proactively address energy and infrastructure issues
- Expands use of renewable energy resources and increased energy efficiency (e.g., reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce dependence on fossil fuels and imported natural gas)
- Reduced energy costs
- Provide electric rate stability and local control
- Entice new business development/jobs by provided lower electricity rates
- Position City for provision of expanded electricity service offerings in the future

Along with the above benefits, the CCA program also presented the following risks:

- Under some scenarios, program rates could be up to 4% higher than those offered by PG&E, particularly within the first three years of the law’s implementation
- Resource obligations and investments taken by the city on behalf of its citizens could result in economic losses.
- Risks inherent in procuring electricity for retail customers is high and should be either effectively managed to minimize financial impact or assigned to the program’s energy suppliers.

Darlene Chiu stated that PG&E supported the initial CCA legislation but continues to be concerned with consumers’ empowerment to exercise their choice of selecting a power company. A second concern for PG&E was that CCA does not require voter approval and PG&E would like consumers to have a vote in the process. In the past, voters in San Francisco turned down public power initiatives (Propositions F, D and Measure I mentioned earlier). The third concern for PG&E is that if a new provider is chosen by the Community Choice Aggregators, customers would have to make an effort to opt out of the new providers in order continue with PG&E, a practice that the company considers unfair because the choice to stay with PG&E will not be made upfront. Finally, PG&E is also not convinced that another provider will deliver the power cheaper.[24]

In May, 2004, the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco passed a Community Choice Aggregation Program. This paved the way for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the San Francisco Department of the Environment to develop a draft implementation plan for a CCA program. After the plan was developed, it was presented to the Board of Supervisors for approval.

In June 2007, The Board of Supervisors granted approval to the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to explore if CCA could meet or beat PG&E's current rates. The San Francisco Office of the Controller was not convinced that customers would save money with community choice aggregation.[25] At the present time, CCA is a long way from becoming a reality with many proponents and opponents weighing in. If CCA is implemented more than 50% of San Francisco's energy would come from renewable sources by 2017.[26]

PG&E - ENVIRONMENTAL RECORD

PG&E has received several mixed reviews on their environmental record. One of the most high profile cases that received media attention was highlighted in the movie *Erin Brokovich*, based on the experience of legal clerk who uncovers information against PG&E. Erin discovered that PG&E's Hinkley Compressor Station, part of a natural gas pipeline connecting to the San Francisco Bay Area, had leaked hexavalent chromium (chromium 6), a cancer-causing chemical, into unlined ponds in Hinkley, California. The chemical infected the groundwater, causing serious illnesses in livestock and people during the 1960s through the 1980s.[27] In 1996 the case was settled and PG&E had to pay $333 million to more than 600 residents of Hinkley, eliminate the chemical from the township, and stop using chromium 6 at their plant. This was the largest settlement on record in a direct action lawsuit.

The second PG&E high profile case that showcases the company's negative record also dates back to the 1990s. In June 1997, a Nevada County jury convicted PG&E of 739 counts of criminal negligence for failing to trim trees near its high-voltage power lines. The negligence lead to fires which destroyed 500 acres, a 19th century schoolhouse, 12 homes, and other properties in the historic Gold Rush town of Rough and Ready. A witness for the prosecution testified that PG&E had diverted $80 million in funds from its tree trimming program into shareholder profits.[28]

The reliance of PG&E on fossil fuels and nuclear power has sparked criticism of PG&Es environmental record. Critics argue that two-thirds of the electricity supplied by PG&E has contributed to environmental contamination either in the form of greenhouse gases or nuclear waste. Opponents have also pointed that PG&E has strongly opposed California Senate Bill 411 which proposes that utility companies increase the amount of energy produced from renewable sources to 33 percent by 2020.

In 2002, the state of California mandated that 20 percent of the energy produced by PG&E should be produced from renewable resources, such as wind or solar power by 2017. In 2006 a Senate Bill 107 was enacted which accelerated the goal of producing 20 percent from renewable sources to 2010. This is known as the Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS). According to Darlene Chiu of PG&E, they are making progress toward that goal.[29] Currently, 43 percent of the energy produced by PG&E's is generated from fossil fuels while 23 percent is nuclear power. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown of the power profile (type of resources used to generate electricity) from 2004 to present.

PG&E Power Profile

Energy Resources	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008 Projected
Eligible Renewable	12%	12%	13%	12%	14%
Biomass and Waste	5%	5%	5%	4%	4%
Geothermal	2%	2%	2%	4%	4%
Small Hydroelectric	3%	4%	4%	2%	4%
Solar	0%	0%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Wind	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%
Coal	3%	1%	1%	4%	2%
Large Hydroelectric	17%	20%	19%	13%	17%
Natural Gas	48%	42%	40%	47%	44%
Nuclear	21%	24%	24%	23%	22%
Other	0%	1%	<1%	1%	1%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: PG&E bill inserts

Note: Eligible renewable includes biomass (organic material made from plants and animals) and waste geothermal, solar, wind and small hydroelectric capabilities.

Despite public opinion of PG&E's environmental misdeeds, the company has continued to tout its environmental conservation record. A sample of pro-environmental initiatives implemented by the company include, the June 2007 partnership with The Association of Monterey Bay Area Government to provide free CFL bulbs to homes and hospitality businesses. In addition, the association provided free energy surveys and information on how to save on gas and electricity bills[30]. A second initiative was its collaboration with IBM as a corporate partner to optimize energy efficiency at PG&E's California information technology operations. Together the companies will work to reduce energy consumption at the facilities by 80% by optimizing equipment operation and reducing heat.[31]

Evidence of PG&E's pro-environmental record is also evident in the awards and recognition it has received from non-profit organizations. In June 2007, The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), an environmental action group, honored PG&E for the company's record of environmental leadership. According to Ralph Cavanagh, energy program director of the NRDC, "The company's industry-leading energy efficiency programs and its bold leadership on climate change at the state and federal level provide an example of how the actions of one company can make a significant contribution to protecting the environment."[32] This is one of over 140 environmental awards that PG&E has been awarded over their history. Recently the Planning and Conservation League named PG&E the "Environmental Business of the Year" to recognize PG&E's leadership in renewable energy and land stewardship.[33]

Despite the many awards that PG&E has received over the years, consumer groups, such as the Utility Reform Network and GGAG point out that some if not all of PG&E's green efforts are funded by consumers. One source of revenue for Utility companies is the "public goods" charge on consumer energy bills, amounting to 1% of each customer's bill. Of this amount nearly half goes toward energy efficient programs. Over the last 30 years, these programs have allowed California to keep its per-capita power consumption relatively flat while consumption has grown in other states by nearly 50%.[34]

Under a 2006 California law, the state pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2020. The fastest way to accomplish this reduction is through energy efficient programs which include adopting appliance and building standards to reduce power intake, eliminating wasteful practices, promoting efficient lighting and offering rebates to customers who install energy saving appliances. When consumers save energy, utility companies experience a decrease in revenue. In the early 1980s, the state of California compensated lost revenue for utility companies that sold less power as a result of energy efficient programs. This move provided an incentive for utility companies to encourage more efficient programs.[35]

Because of the increased pressure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in June 2007, PG&E and other California Utility companies asked for an additional $400 million to $1 billion in cash incentives from their customer's if these companies meet or exceed state efficiency goals. This would add another $2.50 to the typical customer's electricity bill.[36] The utility companies believe that their energy efficiency actions should offer these companies the ability to make profits equal to the profit the company could earn if they built power plants and sold the output. The request for more money from customers angered many consumer groups and is being considered by the California Public Utilities Commission.

Peter Darbee, CEO of PG&E realizes the challenges ahead, "…this is the hardest thing I've ever done. Trying to convert a classic, regulated utility into a high-performance, competitive, customer-centric organization is a big job, and it's going to take us years to do it, but that's what we're trying to do."[37]

ENDNOTES

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