

## **Utility Preparedness for Wildfires** **September 26, 2019**

### **Justification**

As the frequency, intensity and duration of wildfires has increased in the West, there is a need to have electrical companies take measures to reduce the risk of these events. For example, powerline fires are on average 10 times larger than fires from other causes and the suppression of fires has become less effective during extreme weather conditions, while utility outages and line faults increase during such events.

All electrical companies in the state should develop a wildfire mitigation and recovery plan to minimize the probability that electrical infrastructure may be the origin or contributing source for the ignition of a catastrophic wildfire during extreme weather conditions and to implement a wildfire plan that embraces safety, prevention, mitigation and recovery as central priorities. Plans would provide an approach that appropriately balances the cost of mitigation with the risk of potential wildfire; describe the procedures and standards electrical companies will use to inspect infrastructure and perform vegetation management, among other things; and include a plan for community outreach and public awareness before, during and after a wildfire season. A collaborative stakeholder approach is essential to reducing overall risk of a catastrophic wildfire.

The proposed Council recommendation was developed by PacifiCorp with a focus on identifying necessary steps for investor-owned utilities, while recognizing the importance of a statewide approach.

### **Recommendation**

A statutory policy statement to (1) establish standards and procedures associated with the operation of electrical infrastructure, including risk-based assessments to identify fire high consequence areas, situational awareness, operational improvements, vegetation management and pro-active de-energization, (2) provide for regulatory oversight by requiring that wildfire mitigation and recovery plans be approved by the Public Utility Commission of Oregon in consultation with relevant local and state agencies and (3) provide a mechanism for the recovery of prudent costs.

### **Key Objectives and Elements of Utility Wildfire Mitigation Plans**

The goal is to develop and deploy an integrated and multifaceted wildfire preparedness strategy to protect customers and communities from increased wildfire risk, including, but not limited to:

- Fire threat modeling
- Resilient systems with lower likelihood of fault events, including system hardening, inspection and correction standards and vegetation management
- Response when faults occur, including equipment and personnel plans to minimize scope and duration of the fault event

- Situational awareness and operational readiness designed to mitigate impacts to the system, including improved weather monitoring, coordination with the Oregon Department of Forestry and other state agencies, local emergency management partnerships, operational response and Public Safety Power Shutoff
- Maintenance of the plan, assessment of its effectiveness and review of impacts on stakeholders

### **Mission Return on Investment**

The benefit of the recommendation is to minimize the probability that electrical infrastructure may be the origin or contributing source for the ignition of a catastrophic wildfire during extreme weather conditions. While the benefits cannot be easily quantified, the destruction in California of human life and property, health impacts and suppression costs, among other things, has been devastating. The implementation of utility wildfire mitigation plans is invaluable in the face of increasing threats of catastrophic wildfires during extreme weather conditions.

The implementation of wildfire mitigation plans will necessarily require an approach that appropriately balances the costs of mitigation with the risk of potential catastrophic wildfire. To mitigate any associated costs, the recommendation includes regulatory oversight by requiring wildfire mitigation and recovery plans to be approved by the Public Utility Commission of Oregon in consultation with relevant local and state agencies. This oversight will also provide the necessary flexibility for wildfire mitigation plans to address unique circumstances and evolve over time as the threats and risks of catastrophic wildfire continue to be reviewed in light of overall fire prevention measures statewide.

Currently, Oregon is benefiting from the ongoing implementation of wildfire mitigation plans by PacifiCorp and Portland General Electric. The implementation of legislation and any associated regulatory review should be timely completed to ensure approved wildfire mitigation plans can be deployed in advance of the 2020 fire season. There is no risk in acting with urgency to implement the Council's recommendation.

### **Process and Next Steps**

The process going forward should focus on the development of a legislative proposal to be considered during the 2020 legislative session to effectuate the recommendation. The Council will be a key partner in developing a broad coalition to support a legislative effort, including federal, state and local fire suppression agencies, critical emergency response agencies (such as local fire and law enforcement organizations), local governments, labor unions, the Public Utility Commission of Oregon and statewide utilities, among others.