

**BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE
OF CALIFORNIA**

Order Instituting Rulemaking to Implement Electric
Utility Wildfire Mitigation Plans Pursuant to Senate |
Bill 901 (2018). |

Rulemaking 18-10-007
(Filed October 25, 2018)

Comments on 2020 Wildfire Mitigation Plans

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Pursuant to the January 16, 2020, California Public Utility Commission's Wildfire Safety Division's Resolution WSD-001 concerning Review of 2020 Wildfire Mitigation Plans Pursuant to Public Utilities Code Sections 8386 and 8386.3 , Alan Stein submits these comments on 2020 Wildfire Mitigation Plans under the specific authority of PUC Code 8386(d) .

Situational Context

On January 16th, 2020, two substantial risks for California conflagrations during the summer of 2020 were not on the radar.

First, no one but seers could have predicted a record low February rain total in Northern California. Localities are 10-15 inches below minimal amounts.

In coastal Mendocino, for instance, the seasonal minimum rainfall is about 35 inches. As of today, about 23 inches have fallen since the season began. Forest and field will be bone dry earlier and more extensively than perhaps at any time in recorded history.

Second, no one could have predicted a plague sweeping across America resulting in the staffs of electrical utilities and this agency ordered to work from their homes while in lock down conditions never before known in California.

As a result of the pandemic, no one knows how many fire fighters or emergency actors will be stricken from active duty rosters this summer. No one knows if evacuations of a hundred thousand people from massive fires, such as the Kinkaide Fire in Sonoma County last year, will be delayed, or thwarted by having to move virus stricken people into healthy communities or vice versa.

No one knows how many more people whose lungs are clogged by virus and bacteria will die when wildfire smoke blocks the sky across Northern California.

Finally, and most germane, neither the data which this Party obtained about early 2020 execution of the WMPs nor the projections utilities made in them can be extrapolated into the future, because of the intervening lock down.

Tree trimming, for instance, has presumably been vastly reduced during the last three weeks of statewide work shut down with no known date when the governor will allow resumption.

Therefore, the WSD and the CPUC needs to extend the time for data requests for the 2020 WMPs so that the public and WSD can assess the impact of the virus statewide lock down upon the ability of utilities to deliver what they promised in their wildfire plans.

Because the virus has invalidated the WMPs in ways it is yet impossible to assess, CPUC must order that the WMPs be revised and resubmitted based on how badly their execution has been harmed by the lock down.

The Public Will Scorn Mitigation When it Sought Prevention

The Legislature chose the word Mitigation to describe this process. The late Latin *mitigare* root means to pacify and soften. In contrast, the Latin root *praevenire* means the action of anticipating [and stopping] an event. Smokey the Bear's "Only you can prevent... fires folks" has become "we'll run the numbers on pacifying the fires and get back to you, ten thousand pages latter."

Rather than assume responsibility for its unwillingness to impose draconian measures to force utilities to stop fires regardless of the consequences to their share or bond holders, the Legislature and the Governor chose to create

a scapegoat they could blame when last year they created the Wildfire Safety Division of the California Public Utility Commission.

If this assertion appears over the top, consider this irony. The governor shut down the entire State of California to calm a virus, but neither he nor the Legislature had the gumption to stop PG&E from immediately causing fires. Viruses do not make campaign donations or take out ads. It is safer for politicians to legislate more regulation than implement timely solutions.

This summer and fall when massive wildfires— in spite of the regulatory process embodied in these WMPs— burst into flame after trees slam into electrical lines and again roar down from the mountains, the public will remember that it was the Legislature and Governor who legislated this process and the



Wildfires burning from Clearlake to Redding as seen from the Space Station several years ago Source: NASA ISS 056-E-126999

public will judge the resultant WMPs are woefully inadequate to stop wildfires, the number of workshops and comments on 2020 WMPs duly noted notwithstanding.

This summer California will be like Troy “when Hecuba and her daughters crowded about the alter stones like doves driven by a black tempest.”¹ CPUC wildfire plans, data compiled, and compliance judgements rendered— all will be for naught when Troy burns.

PG&E’s WMP Illustrates Root Cause Failures of this Process

Since PG&E has stated that about half the fires it causes arise from trees hitting its lines, I restrict analysis to its Vegetation Management Program, also known as tree trimming or felling to the broader public.

According to a PG&E’s data request answer, there are 96,063 trees along its distribution lines which pose potential fire risk.²

PG&E to its credit would like to cut down the trees that lean towards its lines. The CPUC however has ruled that each tree must be monitored for compliance both to PG&E’s own rules and those under consideration in its 2020 WMP . Id page 2. Not all leaning trees that can hit a line, nor branches overhanging a line, may be cut unless the tree is inspected and judged a risk under those rules.

To assess risk, PG&E is forced to hire an army of engineers, data punchers, arborists, and managers, an army that would delight Kafka and flabbergast

¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, in *Virgil’s Works*, Modern Library : 1950, page 36

² Wildfire MP_DR_CEJA_003 Q002 at page 2. Archived on PGE’s web page for data requests

Virgil. What is the cost in man power and organization to yearly assess the risk of trees falling onto it electric lines when the tree number is 96,063?

Just for regular tree trimming and cutting, as opposed to Enhanced Vegetation Management, PGE has created **five layers of management bureaucracy**³ teams of arborists, data punchers, administrative staff, and patrol teams all following 29 pages of detailed instructions found in the utility's Vegetation Management Quality Assurance Distribution and Local Transmission Audit Procedure.⁴ These four layers include:

Vegetation Management Quality Assurance Auditor
Quality Assurance Program Manager.
Supervising Vegetation Program Manager
Vegetation Management Operations Senior Manager
Vegetation Management Operations Manager
Director

See the Audit Preparation Flow Chart for how they operate together.⁵

Because of one decision by the CPUC in this proceeding to bar PG&E from cutting **all** the leaning trees which could fall on its lines, PG&E is forced to hire this bureaucratic staff to assess each of its 96,063 trees— the huge yearly cost of which is borne by rate payers— otherwise known as the public. The Wildfire Management Account PG&E holds in the CPUC should break out the costs for this bureaucracy.

Costs charged rate holders presumably include, but are not limited to, inspection or patrolling both pre and post, document production, auditing, plan creation, plan approval, sample determination, sample stratification, GIS map production, data base query, open meetings, discussions for scope and timeline

³Wildfire Mitigation Plans_DR-CEJA_003-Q002 Attach01.pdf at page 26. found on PGE's data production web page for this proceeding

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id at page 27

and safety concerns, communications, and data collection. And none of this work includes actually cutting down any trees. If anyone is looking to save rate payers money, changing this one decision preventing PG&E from cutting all dangerous trees that can hit lines could end this absurd and costly process of monitoring all trees.

Because it apparently wants to hug trees more than make the public safe at the least cost, the CPUC created these huge bureaucracies within utilities. Has the CPUC ever done a cost comparison to determine how much less it would cost to cut down these 96,063 trees in one or two years— rather than make rate payers shoulder the cost forever of yearly assessing the status of these trees?

I am requesting the WSD make that cost analysis.

Indeed, the Wildlife Safety Division should demand or do such a cost comparison. The WSD should then factor into the cost analysis the monetary benefit in lives and property saved by eliminating within two years all trees and their limbs capable of striking power lines and compare that benefit to the liability of leaving untouched many trees which can endanger lives and property for decades.

One can only surmise that the cost of cutting down each tree within the span of a few years would be far less than forever assessing the status of the trees.

Compounding absurdities, PG&E tells us that in 2019 it used a HTRS and a Matrix score to assess trees.

The Hazardous Tree Rating System and Tree Score and Impact Score within the Matrix Score were all dependent on subjective judgements of arborists.

But in March of 2020, PG&E was supposed to have implemented (but the accelerated pace of this proceeding has prevented data requests to assess improvements) a new Tree Assessment Tool that eliminates arborists from

farrowing their brows over abatement scores. Perhaps LIDAR mapping eliminated some assessment jobs.⁶

None of the above jobs and tasks include the costs of trimming branches to set distances from the electric line or auditing the task. PG&E keeps meticulous records, running to tens of thousands of lines on spread sheets, of how many feet limbs hang over or to the side of its lines.⁷ This data is broken down to four, six, eight, or twelve feet of limbs from lines. CPUC seem insensitive to the cost of obtaining and maintaining this massive amount of data.

CPUC has to assess whether it would be cheaper in one fell swoop to cut all the limbs off a tree threatening a line than to patrol, inspect, trim a little here and a little there over the life of trees.

To my knowledge CPUC itself has never asked PG&E or other utilities to run the gross cost differences between the go getter American approach or the slow death Kafkaian approach. I request CPUC chose the least cost for the most good in the shortest amount of time and abandon the ponderous approach of continued risk analysis.

The WildFire Safety Division should create a spreadsheet to discover if it is cheaper to cut all the trees that can hit lines within a couple of years than the costs for a hundred years of patrolling, auditing, and cutting those same trees that could hit lines.

WSD also should add up the cost of trimming all trees to the Enhanced Vegetation Management⁸ standard PG&E will employ over the next ten years

⁶ Wildlife Mitigation Plans _DR_CEJA_003_Q05.pdf

⁷ WildfireMitigationPlans_DR_AlanStein_002-Q03-Atch01

⁸ EVM is a trim of a 12 feet radius around all lines and from the lines to the sky. At PG&E 's current rate, it will take about ten years to finish EVM. PG&E will take more than a decade to complete the program.

versus trimming all the trees to that standard within two years. When the WSD has made those calculations for the two year complete treatment versus the 100 year treatment and placed the gross numbers side by side, it should ask, “will more lives and property be saved if all the work is completed in two years versus 100 years.”

If the evacuation of a hundred thousand people around Santa Rosa last year during the Kincaide Fire and the deaths of hundreds the year before cannot shake the Legislature, the Governor, and the CPUC out of their mind set fixated on risk analysis, I fear my words fall on deaf ears.

Respectfully submitted from Mendocino, California on this 7th day of March, 2020.

/s/ Alan Stein

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