



**The Protect Our Communities
Foundation**
4452 Park Blvd #309
San Diego, CA 92116

June 23, 2021

California Public Utilities Commission
Wildfire Safety Division
Attn: Wildfire Safety Advisory Board
505 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102

Sent Via Email (wildfiresafetydivision@cpuc.ca.gov)

Re: The Protect Our Communities Foundation Comments on the Draft Recommendations on the 2022 WMP Guidelines, Performance Metrics, and Safety Culture Assessment

Dear Wildfire Safety Advisory Board:

The Protect Our Communities Foundation (PCF) submits these comments in accordance to the Wildfire Safety Advisory Board's (WSAB) June 17, 2021 Draft Recommendations on the 2022 Wildfire Mitigation Plan Guidelines, Performance Metrics, and Safety Culture Assessment. PCF appreciates WSAB's thoughtful recommendations that focus on increasing transparency and reporting requirements, engaging parties and experts in the review of the utilities' WMPs, and mitigating climate change. PCF focuses below on several suggested revisions.

I. UTILITY MODELING AND DATA MUST BE MADE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE TO ENSURE A HOLISTIC REVIEW OF WMP DECISION-MAKING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS.

PCF commends WSAB's focus on ensuring a transparent review process. Without having such a process in place, WSAB correctly notes that "neither the WSD nor the public can verify the accuracy of these models. Verifying the accuracy of the models remains essential to be able to understand how the utilities set their mitigation priorities and whether those priorities involve the correct and most effective actions and prevention measures. The utilities' models must be

vetted to ensure the prudent use of ratepayer funds.”¹ PCF further agrees with the WSAB recommendation that “the utilities must provide enough information for the WSD to evaluate the science being used, methodologies and assumptions being made, and expertise being used to conduct the modelling work.”²

PCF agrees that “neutral peer review, collaboration, and more accessible data are necessary to ensure that the best emerging science, tools, and technology are being used.”³ One of PCF’s long-standing concerns remains the accuracy of the utilities’ self-reporting. Modeling assumptions and inputs and the resulting data and conclusions reached by the modeling must be made publicly available to enable thorough review and analysis by other parties, experts and the WSD. A peer review process, as proposed by WSAB, could test the utilities’ assumptions and decision-making but public transparency and availability of all data sets, assumptions and inputs must also be required in order to meet statutory mandates⁴, California’s climate goals, and cost-effectiveness. PCF supports WSAB’s recommendation⁵ that the 2022 WMP Guidelines should require improved reporting on modeling outcomes and how the outcomes contribute to decision-making, as well as the proposed peer review process. But PCF urges the WSAB to include an explicit transparency requirement and process to enable other groups to evaluate and comment on the effectiveness of the utilities’ assumptions, inputs and modeling results.

II. VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PRACTICES MUST COMPLY WITH STATUTORY MANDATES AND BE THOROUGHLY VETTED.

PCF appreciates WSAB’s focus on the environmental impacts of the utilities’ WMPs. Utilizing ecologists, data scientists, state agencies, and experts in assessing the impacts and procedures of the utilities’ vegetation management and related wildfire mitigation activities can ensure that utility practices actually mitigate wildfires and do not cause any negative environmental impacts. All utility wildfire mitigation programs remain statutorily required to “minimize the risk of its electrical lines and equipment causing catastrophic wildfires, including

¹ Wildfire Safety Advisory Board, Draft Recommendations on the 2022 Wildfire Mitigation Plan Guidelines, Performance Metrics, and Safety Culture Assessment (June 17, 2021), (“WSAB Recommendations”), p. 10

² WSAB Recommendations, p. 7.

³ WSAB Recommendations, p. 10.

⁴ Pub. Util. Code, §§ 451, 454.52, 454.53.

⁵ WSAB Recommendations, pp. 11-12.

consideration of dynamic climate change risks.”⁶ PCF has previously argued⁷ that the removal of healthy trees increases climate change risks and conflicts with the Commission’s statutory mandates, unless such wholesale tree removal is determined to be the only means to mitigate wildfires. PCF supports WSAB’s recommendation that the 2022 WMP Guidelines “must prohibit the practice of removing healthy trees following wildfire events without some kind of environmental review by an independent ecologist.”⁸

PCF also notes that whether or not utility wildfire mitigation practices increase the risk of wildfire and further climate change remains a material issue of dispute that should be subject to formal examination through an evidentiary process. Thus, PCF urges WSAB to consider recommending evidentiary hearings on this issue to assist WSD and the Commission in the assessment of utility wildfire mitigation practices and to develop facts about the impacts of utility vegetation management programs on climate change. Such evidentiary hearings could produce the factual evidence to enable WSD and the Commission to determine its and the utilities’ compliance with California’s statutory mandates to reduce GHG emissions and to address climate change.

As a means to increase transparency in the evaluation of utility vegetation management practices, PCF also supports WSAB’s recommendation to require “inclusion of any notices of violation issued by other state agencies such as the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), or the Coastal Commission, among others, as they relate to utility wildfire mitigation programs like vegetation management.”⁹ Implementing this recommendation will enable WSD, the Commission, and the parties to thoroughly review the utilities’ WMPs and to offer guidance and suggestions based on the more fulsome information provided.

⁶ Pub. Util. Code, § 8386, subd. (c)(3).

⁷ The Protect Our Communities Foundation Comments to Draft Recommendations on the 2021 Wildfire Mitigation Plan Updates for Large Investor-Owned Utilities (April 9, 2021), p. 3.

⁸ WSAB Recommendations, p. 17.

⁹ WSAB Recommendations, p. 16.

III. WSD SHOULD TRACK THE COMMISSION’S S-MAP AND RAMP PROCEEDINGS AND INCORPORATE ITS REQUIREMENTS INTO SAFETY CULTURE ASSESSMENTS.

PCF appreciates WSAB’s recommendation that WSD should “interview a variety of stakeholders including utility managers, contractor managers, utility employees, and contractor workers.”¹⁰ However, in order to create a full picture of the utilities’ safety culture, WSD should also incorporate into its evaluation the Commission’s Safety Model Assessment Proceeding (S-MAP) and Risk Assessment Mitigation Phase (RAMP) requirements. The Commission’s S-MAP and RAMP proceedings involve comprehensively assessing the safety of the utilities’ systems, and the prior decisions issued in these proceedings require utilities to describe their plans to identify, assess, and mitigate risks before they can request ratepayer funding for their safety-related activities in their General Rate Cases.

As PCF has argued,¹¹ the Commission’s S-MAP and RAMP requirements comprise key indicators about the state of the utilities’ safety practices generally and specifically, both within the context of wildfire safety, as well as in determining the veracity of the utilities’ self-reporting. WSAB’s recommendation that “WSD should track the CPUC Proceedings affecting the utilities’ wildfire mitigation activities, link those to its review efforts and engage directly in a meaningful way”¹² constitutes the first step in the right direction. PCF encourages WSAB to do a bit more and to incorporate into their recommendations the requirements emerging from the Commission’s S-MAP and RAMP proceedings. PCF recommends that WSAB incorporate the S-MAP and RAMP requirements into its evaluations and processes to ensure that “a full picture of the safety culture at the utility for the WSD”¹³ is created and that recommendations are consistent across the various wildfire oversight entities.

¹⁰ WSAB Recommendations, p. 25.

¹¹ *See generally* The Protect Our Communities Foundation’s Comments on Wildfire Safety Division Draft Safety Culture Assessments (December 18, 2020); The Protect Our Communities Foundation Comments to Wildfire Safety Division’s Proposed Changes to the 2021 Safety Certification Guidance Pursuant to Public Utilities Code § 8389(f)(2) (June 1, 2021); The Protect Our Communities Foundation Reply Comments on Wildfire Safety Division’s Proposed Changes to the 2021 Safety Certification Guidance (June 15, 2021).

¹² WSAB Recommendations, p. 27.

¹³ WSAB Recommendations, p. 25.

IV. CONCLUSION

PCF commends WSAB for accomplishing all it has to date. PCF respectfully requests that WSAB revise its recommendations to create a more robust peer review process of utility WMPs; require full transparency of the underlying modeling assumptions, data sets and modeling results; conduct evidentiary hearings to assess wildfire mitigation practices and compliance with statutory mandates; and incorporate the Commission's S-MAP and RAMP proceedings into the safety culture assessments conducted by WSAB.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Julia Severson

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cc: Service List for R.18-10-007