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

WILLIAM B. ABRAMS COMMENTS ON THE WILDFIRE SAFETY DIVISION
DRAFT SCA REQUIREMENTS OF ELECTRICAL CORPORATIONS

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In accordance with Rule 14.3 of the California Public Utilities Commission ("Commission") Rules of Practice and Procedure and the Wildfire Safety Division's December 3, 2020 request, William B. Abrams submits these comments. These comments will be submitted to the Director of the Wildfire Safety Division and sent to the service list associated with this proceeding.

SUBJECT INDEX

I. Introduction

I commend the Wildfire Safety Division (WSD) and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) for their strong collaborative work on the Safety Culture Assessment (SCA). This is a strong step forward in terms of regulatory capabilities to advance our wildfire safety goals. These assessment tools will provide strong insight into the corporate culture of our utilities. However, what is lost for me within this draft are the goals and objectives set by the WSD and the regulatory actions that may result. In order to ensure we don't lose sight of our primary goals and objectives, every tool and assessment question should clearly answer the following three questions with an affirmative answer:

1. Do the assessment tools or assessment questions help **meet the goals and objectives** set out by the Wildfire Safety Division?
2. Does this safety culture assessment measure the degree to which a corporation integrates and ingrains **wildfire safety actions and a results-orientation into their culture**?
3. Are conclusions that may be drawn from these assessments **actionable by the Wildfire Safety Division and the electrical corporations**?

These are critical questions to be answered. While some of these assessment tools and associated questions may address utility Human Resource (HR) issues or general corporate cultural issues, they may not be in keeping with the Wildfire Safety Divisions' core mission and may not be actionable. If these tools are only educational in nature, they will not provide a strong basis for the Wildfire Safety Divisions' oversight responsibilities and will not advance utility safety in a meaningful way. Please, consider the following feedback as you refine these assessment tools and set a path to ensure a stronger wildfire safety culture within our utilities:

II. Comments Related to the Assessment Administration

    A) Accountability Defined

    First and foremost, it should be clear that the electrical corporations are solely responsible for the safety of their infrastructure and their business processes when articulating the path forward for this assessment process. *"The WSD's assessment of safety culture is intended to be complementary to, and not a replacement for, ongoing work to improve safety culture at each electrical corporation"* is an important statement but does not go far enough.[1] I am concerned that some utilities might leverage these safety culture assessments as a vehicle to avoid liability and/or to demonstrate "prudency" as it relates to utility-caused wildfires. These assessments in no way should be used to demonstrate safety operations or management-orientation within an electrical corporation to avoid liability from the fires that they may cause. The Wildfire Safety Division must make it clear in no uncertain terms that these assessment tools are not designed and should not be leveraged for that purpose.

    B) Administration Standards

    Of course, the anonymity of the respondents is paramount when developing the approach for the administration of the survey. This should include a deeper dive into the technical aspects of this survey administration to include double-blind activated surveys with unique and randomized identifications and passwords so that electrical corporations could not leverage the data in the event that wildfire financial liability concerns drive them to follow threads with the data. Respondents need to have assurances that when utilities are under financial pressure to avoid wildfire liabilities, they will not be able to rely on this type of data collection for their defense. While assuring this anonymity, the survey should permit the respondents to "opt in" for follow up with the Wildfire Safety Division if additional interviews might be necessary to gain a deeper understanding regarding safety issues within a particular electrical corporation. The employee respondent might also want to follow up with the WSD to clarify a particular answer or elaborate on a safety concern. Consider building integration points so this survey connects to

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[1] Wildfire Safety Division, Safety Culture Assessment Requirements Draft, December, 2020, pg. 3

or at least provides information regarding the commissions' reporting processes including the CPUC whistleblower hotline.

Moreover, the WSD should consider standardizing the survey communications from the electrical corporations rather than leaving discretion up to each utility. Leaving it open to "*may state*" the purpose of the survey, "*should indicate*" that responses will be valuable and "*should indicate*" interest in employee's perceptions could lead to skewed survey results that are more indicative of how the survey is administered rather than the differences in safety culture across the utilities.[2] Even the absence of information from one corporation to another could significantly skew the results. Consider a case where one electrical corporation has a one-line statement that states "responses will have no bearing on a worker's performance review, salary or benefits" while another electrical corporation provides a lengthy page-long version expounding and reinforcing the same sentiment to reassure the respondent about employee protections. This type of variation could elicit profound differences in the survey responses and must be avoided.

Instead, I suggest the Wildfire Safety Division hold workshops to align the communication vehicles so they are the same in content and design. The only thing that should be different about the survey design is the logo at the top from the different electrical corporations. These surveys might also benefit from central administration and dissemination rather than being independently pursued by each utility. In this way, versions could also be collaboratively created for Small and Multijurisdictional Electrical Corporations (SMJUs) and Independent Transmission Owners (ITOs) where only the form of the questions change within the surveys. There are mutual assistance agreements leveraged for post-fire repairs so I see no reason why a mutual assistance agreement could not be used for these proactive safety purposes that would create efficiencies, lower costs and ensure uniform administration of the survey. I would also suggest that the WSD use stronger language to describe and discourage unapproved communications about the survey to curtail their use.

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[2] Wildfire Safety Division, Safety Culture Assessment Requirements Draft, December, 2020, pg. 9

C) Survey Reporting

There needs to be transparency regarding the reporting of aggregate results from the surveys. I suggest that the WSD leverage public-facing scorecards that go beyond the four-level behaviorally anchored rating scale so that ratepayers and others have a deeper understanding regarding the safety culture within the electrical corporations. Without financial incentives or penalties built into the assessment scoring methodology, public awareness and pressure will be valuable for motivating electrical corporations to demonstrate exceptional safety cultures. I understand that this may need to be incorporated into a future phase of the survey but laying the groundwork now is important so that the reports and reporting process are considered with how the questions are designed.

III.   Comments Related to the Assessment Design

My overarching concern looking at the design of the survey is alignment of the questions to the goals of the survey and making sure it is actionable depending on the results. Many of these survey questions might help to understand employee satisfaction or how they feel within an electrical corporation and while that is important it should not necessarily be the focus of this survey. In many ways, these questions seem to explore employee feelings as if it was a psychological survey and not a tool to improve safety. Also, consider that the categories (Leadership Influence and Workforce Behavior) don't necessarily align with the makeup of the questions. Consider that within the "leadership influence" section (Q #5) it asks "I am regularly asked for my ideas…" which seems to reflect workforce influence and then the next question (Q #6) asks "leaders actively seek…" which might be characterized as a leadership behavior.[3]

Again, I want to emphasize that these questions do explore issues that are very important for employee relations within corporations. It is only how answer variations translate into actionable wildfire safety-oriented information that I am questioning. Yes, employees that feel heard and respected are more likely to contribute to safety-oriented solutions. However,

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[3] Wildfire Safety Division, Safety Culture Assessment Requirements Draft, December, 2020, pg. 11

understanding whether or not safety concerns are reported and whether or not mitigation solutions are readily identified and implemented is where I believe we need to focus this survey. The safety culture of an electrical corporation must be based on **actions and results above feelings and sentiment** for the utility to be successful at mitigate wildfire risks. There are many utilities where "Safety is Our First Priority" type messaging is displayed across all of their office buildings and referenced on every voicemail greeting. These types of mottos may be good reminders and may reinforce a safety-oriented culture or they may be leveraged as communication vehicles to provide an illusion of safety where safety-oriented actions are rarely ingrained across an organization. I encouraged the Wildfire Safety Division to focus the assessment on understanding if and how electrical corporations provide an **action and results-oriented safety culture**.

IV.   Conclusion and Modifications to the Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale

The draft Safety Culture Assessment Requirements of Electrical Corporations put forward by the Wildfire Safety Division demonstrate strong work and is a huge step forward in terms of regulatory engagement to promote utility wildfire safety. However, there are substantive changes to this draft document that should be pursued to ensure the assessments focus on actions and the results-orientation of employees and executives relative to wildfire safety rather than feelings and safety sentiment. These survey administration and design modifications would mean that the four-levels of the "behaviorally anchored rating scale" would change from an indication of culture defined as "how safety is viewed" to a scale that indicates how safety actions and results are integrated and ingrained within the corporate culture.[4]

As a wildfire survivor, it is an action and results-oriented culture that I want to see from our electrical corporations. There must be proxies to the usual competitive pressures in other industries that drive actions and results within utilities to ensure they are focused on safety results as bottom-line metrics. These assessments should ascertain the degree to which that type of culture exists within our electrical utilities. I have heard enough safety mantras and mottos since the fires of 2017 to know all electrical corporations feel good about safety including those

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[4] Wildfire Safety Division, Safety Culture Assessment Requirements Draft, December, 2020, pg. 14

or especially those that circumvent safety actions to maximize their bottom-line financials. **I urge the Wildfire Safety Division not to develop tools that verify and validate that utilities feel good about safety. Instead, modify these draft assessments to focus on measuring the degree to which electrical corporations have an action and results-oriented wildfire safety culture.**

Dated:

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Respectfully submitted,

  /s/   William B. Abrams

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