



September 27, 2021

Via Electronic Filing

Filing Center
Public Utility Commission of Oregon
201 High Street SE, Suite 100
P.O. Box 1088
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Docket AR 648/638 - Wildfire Mitigation Rulemaking

Attention: Filing Center

Central Lincoln People's Utility District (CLPUD) and Tillamook People's Utility District (TPUD) appreciate the opportunity to submit comments concerning the Public Utility Commission of Oregon's (OPUC) draft rules for AR 648/638.

1. Addition of a Minimum Trim Cycle Requirement to OAR 860-024-0016 - Minimum Vegetation Clearance Requirements

At the September 13, 2021, AR 648/638 -Vegetation and System Hardening Workshop, OPUC staff indicated they are considering adding a minimum trim cycle requirement to OAR 860-024-0016. CLPUD and TPUD recognize the need for vegetation management cycles, but reserves that a trim cycle should not be mandated by the OPUC. Species, climate, as well as other factors, vary widely across Oregon and affect the growth rate of vegetation. Based on a number of factors, an eight-year trim cycle in one region of the state may be as effective at reducing wildfire risk as a five-year cycle in another region. CLPUD and TPUD do not support OPUC specifying a minimum trim cycle.

2. Shortage of Qualified Labor to Perform Vegetation Work

CLPUD and TPUD are committed to safe right-of-ways for overhead lines. Like other utilities, CLPUD and TPUD are challenged by the statewide shortage of qualified labor to perform vegetation work near power lines. Any changes to the minimum vegetation clearances at this time would exacerbate the issue as well as divert scarce resources away from existing databased efforts to mitigate risk within our service territories.



3. Shortage of Qualified Labor to Perform Transmission Inspections

Coastal conditions necessitate that CLPUD and TPUD require their transmission pole inspectors to inspect the base of the pole, as well as, the communication attachment level. Contracted inspectors must climb the poles to perform tests and treat issues identified at the attachment level. The number of qualified contractors to perform this work is very limited in the northwest. CLPUD and TPUD recommend that prior to implementing additional inspection requirements, the OPUC ensure there is a qualified and trained labor pool to perform the required work statewide.

4. Joint Inspections

While the concept of joint pole inspections is enticing to both pole owners and attachees, there are large technology and administrative burdens to overcome for smaller utilities to achieve joint inspections. CLPUD has explored this process internally and with the Oregon Joint Use Association on several occasions. Most small utilities do not have the IT and joint-use staff to implement and administer joint inspections. Hiring the additional staff to meet the requirement would place a disproportionate financial burden on customers of smaller utilities and not necessarily result in lowering the wildfire risk to communities.

For the past three years, CLPUD has imposed sanctions on pole attachees for failure to address violations on its facilities. Although there has been progress made in getting attachees to address violations, response is slow and it is resource intensive. As pole owners, CLPUD and TPUD have no interest in taking on additional ownership for an attachees' inaction. Joint inspections essentially shift the administrative burden of attachees' inaction from the OPUC to the pole owners - without actually reducing the risk of wildfire

CLPUD and TPUD understand that joint inspections have been an agenda item for the OPUC for several years. However, this item should not be included in the current revisions to the OPUC rules for wildfire mitigation. By including joint inspections in the AR 638 discussions, OPUC is using the wildfire threat to push this item forward without indication that it will result in lessening the wildfire risk.

5. Trees from Outside the Right-of-Way

In recent years, CLPUD and TPUD have allocated significant resources to vegetation management in order to deliver safe and reliable power to customers as well as mitigate for wildfire risk. While significant progress has been made in addressing vegetation in the right-of-ways, trees from outside of the right-of-way continue to be the primary source of fire-ignitions on our systems. As utilities cannot maintain trees outside of their right-of-ways, CLPUD and TPUD recommend that the OPUC identify and engage with landowners adjacent to power lines – specifically in high fire risk areas - to inform them of their responsibility regarding fire ignitions that emanate from trees on their property making contact with power lines.



6. Exemption from Local Permitting for Pruning or Removal of Vegetation

CLPUD and TPUD recommend the OPUC create an exemption from the permitting requirements of local jurisdictions for the pruning and/or removal of vegetation within or off right-of-way. Smaller utilities, such as CLPUD and TPUD, afford one right-of-way resource for their entire service territory. The process to acquire permits from multiple cities and counties, in addition to notifying landowners and responding to customer requests, is resource intensive and extends risk if the local jurisdiction is unresponsive.

7. Community Education Related to Pruning and Removal of Vegetation Around Electric Facilities

CLPUD and TPUD recommend the OPUC initiate a community education campaign that explains why pruning and removal of vegetation around electric facilities is critical to the safety and well-being of Oregon communities. A statewide effort and coordinated messaging would go a long way toward helping all utilities carry out the requirements of the OPUC.

Respectively,

/s/ Ty Hillebrand

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