



Oregon Citizens' Utility Board

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January 8, 2021

Public Utility Commission of Oregon
Attn: Caroline Moore
201 High St SE, Suite 100
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: AR 638 – Wildfire Mitigation Plan Rulemaking: Scoping Survey

Dear Ms. Moore:

The Oregon Citizens' Utility Board (CUB) submits these comments in response to the AR 638 scoping survey circulated by Oregon Public Utility Commission Staff (Staff) on December 15, 2020. CUB appreciates the opportunity to engage in this important rulemaking whose outcome should reduce Oregonians' wildfire risk in a cost-effective manner while furthering the goals articulated in Section 5(B)(4)-(5) of Governor Brown's Executive Order 20-04 (EO 20-04). CUB will respond to each of the questions posed by Staff in order.

1. *What are your objectives/expectations for wildfire mitigation?*

The severity and attendant customer impact of wildfires in Oregon will continue to increase as climate change intensifies. As last year's extreme wildfire events demonstrated, there is a real and shifting risk to Oregonians and the state's utility system wildfire mitigation practices must change. Dollars need to be spent to help mitigate this risk. However, customer funds should be spent in a cost-effective manner. CUB would like this rulemaking to engage in a fact-based exercise to take a hard look at all utilities' systems to target higher risk areas. Once these areas are identified, all stakeholders must determine which investments will best mitigate wildfire risk in a cost-effective manner. At the very least, this rulemaking should prescribe a manner and format for this information to be gleaned so parties can engage in a fact-based exercise when the rules are being implemented.

By taking a hard look at the most at-risk regions and the necessary investments to mitigate risk therein, stakeholders can be more certain that utility investments are both cost-effective and will actually serve to mitigate wildfire risk. While this is of less concern for the state's consumer-owned utilities, CUB is wary that investor-owned utilities may seek to invest substantial capital in their systems as a means to boost profits. CUB recognizes the need for dollars to be spent, but ratepayers should only pay for investments that meaningfully mitigate wildfire risk. Since risk is calculated by examining the likelihood and consequences of an event, areas with high wildfire likelihood and high consequences should be prioritized. Consequences should consider the potential damage to utility infrastructure and homes and businesses.

CUB would also like to stress that this rulemaking in no way obviates the statewide utility requirement to furnish adequate and safe service under ORS § 757.020. Indeed, the outcome of this rulemaking should be a wildfire mitigation plan (WMP) that goes beyond traditional utility practices to ensure safety. We are examining the impacts and risks of a shifting and likely continually worsening natural disaster. The WMPs that result from this rulemaking must help ensure safe and adequate service, but should not be viewed as a means to have *de facto* complied with ORS § 757.020.

Relatedly, WMPs should be designed to provide real risk mitigation and protection for customers, rather than providing a checklist for utilities to demonstrate compliance with in order to avoid potential liability.

2. *What are the components of a comprehensive electric utility WMP e.g., what does the table of contents look like?*

As discussed, the WMPs should contain a requirement to assess each individual utility's service territory to determine which areas are higher risk where investments should be prioritized. The plans should also require the utilities to conduct analyses to determine which investments will provide the greatest potential impact. This should include a cost-effectiveness analysis that includes the cost of a resource and the likelihood that it would need to be replaced before the end of its useful life due to wildfire damage. For example, under an analysis like this, it may be more cost effective to install more expensive fire-resistant pole infrastructure in high-risk areas rather than installing standard wood utility poles that may burn in a future fire event.

The WMPs should also build on existing vegetation management programs and take a hard look at the efficacy of those programs. Enhanced vegetation management practices may be necessary in higher risk areas.

In compliance with EO 20-04, the WMPs should include a discussion of how planned activity will protect public safety, reduce risks to utility customers, and promote energy system resilience. Within this discussion, WMP should identify that high-risk wildfire areas that are inhabited by low to moderate income communities. The WMPs should also include a discussion of regions in which the utility believes public safety power shutoffs (PSPS) may be necessary and beneficial along with supporting rationale. WMPs should also contain information on how energy system resilience will be promoted, especially in areas where PSPS are likely. In an increasingly digitized world, many customers cannot go without electricity or internet for an extended period of time. Bolstering the resilience of PSPS regions will help protect customers.

WMPs should also include a discussion of best available science related to climate change and wildfire impacts and should utilize modeling to help predict which areas may be higher risk in the future. The utilities should engage in quantitative wildfire risk mapping of their transmission and distribution system which includes how climate change may affect the risk profile.

CUB looks forward to reviewing comments and working with stakeholders to develop the contours of a WMP and stresses that this list is in no way comprehensive.

3. *What are your priorities and/or what are the most urgent issues to tackle before next fire season?*

After the highest risk areas within each utility's service territory are identified, real investments in system hardening and enhanced vegetation management need to be made. The survey of each utility's system and the risk profile throughout should help inform where the investments should be made. This will help Oregon ensure that we are not caught flat footed when the next extreme wildfire event comes to our state.

4. *What questions do you have about the rulemaking process and/or WMPs?*

CUB has no questions at this time, but we look forward to engaging in the process.

5. *What are your other comments or concerns?*

CUB has no further comments at this time.

Respectfully Submitted,



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