

Prevention, Protection, Partnerships: Electric Companies Address Wildfire Risk



Wildfires are a persistent and dangerous threat throughout much of the country, and they are particularly prevalent in the West. Nearly 85 percent of wildfires are “human-caused,” a broad category that includes fires started by unattended campfires, burning debris, equipment use and malfunctions, improperly discarded cigarettes, and arson. Electrical equipment and downed power lines also can pose a potential fire risk, particularly when the weather is hot, dry, and windy.

Wildfire behavior is unpredictable due to many variables, including weather conditions, terrain, and tree and vegetation species. This confluence of factors, coupled with changing climate conditions and population growth in more remote areas known as the wildland urban interface, is leading to more frequent, more destructive, and more costly wildfires.

Given the growing threat of wildfires within their service territories, electric companies continue to invest in mitigation, detection, and response efforts to reduce wildfire risk. They also are focused on prevention, protection, and partnerships.

Prevention

Electric companies are making significant investments to harden their systems and to make the energy grid more resilient. Actions include incorporating artificial intelligence, aerial inspections, and various low- and high-tech methods to mitigate potential fire risk caused by electrical equipment and to defend against passing wildfires.

While it is not possible to predict definitively where and when a wildfire may start, it is possible to use data analytics, combined with increasingly accurate weather forecasts and vegetation conditions, to identify high-risk areas. In addition to their enhanced mitigation efforts, some electric companies preemptively shut off power in these risk-prone areas when dangerous weather conditions or high wind events are predicted that could impact electric equipment and power lines. In recent years, electric companies have made significant investments in the energy grid—including system segmentation, islanding, and microgrid deployment—that have reduced the scale and scope of these events.

¹ Short, Karen C. 2017. Spatial wildfire occurrence data for the United States, 1992-2015 [FPA_FOD_20170508]. 4th Edition. Fort Collins, CO: Forest Service Research Data Archive. <https://doi.org/10.2737/RDS-2013-0009.4>

² Public Safety Power Shutoffs and other similarly named actions are intended to reduce the risk of a wildfire resulting from downed power lines and damaged equipment in areas where dangerous weather is forecast. The practice began in California; however, some electric companies in other western states have adopted similar mitigation measures.

Protection

Hardening their systems against increasingly destructive weather conditions is a top investment priority for electric companies. Among their investments, electric companies are installing stronger and more fire-resistant poles and are placing sensors, high-definition cameras, and weather stations and other protective technologies in the field to provide real-time or near real-time information to electric company command centers and first responders.

Collectively, the electric power industry has improved real-time situational awareness capabilities significantly. In fact, electric companies in the West have some of the most advanced weather tracking systems in the country. They also are coordinating with various federal agencies through the Department of Energy to establish shared information platforms that will allow access to mapping tools, satellite data, fire spread modeling, and other analytics that will help drive real-time decisions and actions.

In addition to reducing the risk of fires caused by electric equipment, these measures help to protect equipment from being damaged or destroyed by wildfires and help to minimize service disruptions within and adjacent to fire perimeters.

Partnerships

While wildfires typically are seasonal, electric companies work closely year-round with federal, state, local, and tribal agencies to help identify high-risk areas. This constant collaboration, coordination, and communication focuses unified attention on proactive mitigation measures ranging from high-tech data analysis and aerial inspections via drones to fuel reduction and vegetation management.

The electric power industry also enjoys great cooperation with federal government partners—specifically the U.S. Forest Service; the Departments of Agriculture, Energy, and Interior; and the Federal Aviation Administration—as well as with state regulators and local officials.

The Edison Electric Institute's (EEI's) CEO Wildfire Task Force and the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council's (ESCC's) Wildfire Working Group, which includes investor-owned electric companies, electric cooperatives, and public power utilities, are focused on mitigation efforts, detection, and response as part of a comprehensive wildfire strategy. These efforts are core industrywide objectives for ensuring public safety.

Our Policy Platform

Electric companies—individually and through partnerships with federal, state, and local stakeholders—are taking extraordinary measures to reduce wildfire risks on their systems and are working closely with wildfire managers before, during, and after fires to help save lives and protect property.

Public policies must be reformed to support the continued efforts by electric companies and their wildfire partners to mitigate wildfire risk. It is vital that policymakers:

- Pursue land management strategies that allow electric companies to protect power line rights-of-way (ROW) by allowing access and authority to conduct vegetation management and operation and maintenance activities within and adjacent to ROW.
- Identify and enhance partnership opportunities to assist in fuel reduction efforts on federal lands.
- Expand the use of drones beyond the visual line of sight to conduct more efficient, cost-effective, and timely inspections for wildfire mitigation.
- Increase investments in grant programs at the Department of Energy (DOE) and with the national laboratories to identify available and emerging technologies that could prevent, detect, and mitigate wildfire impacts. Regulatory structures should allow the deployment of this technology.
- Increase investments in grant programs at DOE to address costs associated with wildfire risk mitigation efforts.
- Increase investment in infrastructure resilience and recovery by providing federal funding for grants and tax incentives for investments in wildfire mitigation technologies.

About EEI

The **Edison Electric Institute** (EEI) is the association that represents all U.S. investor-owned electric companies. Our members provide electricity for more than 220 million Americans, and operate in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. As a whole, the electric power industry supports more than 7 million jobs in communities across the United States. In addition to our U.S. members, EEI has more than 65 international electric companies with operations in more than 90 countries, as International Members, and hundreds of industry suppliers and related organizations as Associate Members.

Organized in 1933, EEI provides public policy leadership, strategic business intelligence, and essential conferences and forums.

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