

Undergrounding Powerlines Would Reduce Risk of Wildfires

by Supervisor Linda Parks, January 2019

This article was co-signed by Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, Mayor Jefferson Wagner of Malibu, Mayor Rob McCoy of Thousand Oaks, Mayor David Shapiro of Calabasas, Mayor Linda Northrup of Agoura Hills, and Mayor Steve Freedland of Hidden Hills.

Now that the Camp and Woolsey Fires have wreaked havoc in our communities and victims strive to salvage their lives, we return to the same questions we did after the Tubbs and Thomas Fires. What caused the terrible fires? Who is responsible? What can we do to better protect lives and property in our fire-prone regions?

SCE has admitted that their overhead transmission lines were at fault for igniting the Thomas Fire, which was at the time the largest fire in California's history. Pacific Gas and Electric is reporting the Camp Fire, which is now the state's largest and most destructive fire, could bankrupt the utility.

In Ventura and Los Angeles Counties, the Woolsey Fire may also be linked to SCE electricity transmission. There is no doubt that wildfires often start because overhead power lines break, or strike each other in high winds, or when trees or limbs topple into lines, or when old power equipment simply fails. In fact, Cal Fire concluded that utility-owned power lines sparked a dozen of the major fires that devastated Northern California in 2017.

PG&E reportedly advised its shareholders that it expects to pay out \$2.5 billion in damages for the 2017 fires and faces up to \$15 billion in liability. The damage from this year's Camp Fire alone could be in the tens of billions of dollars.

The utilities have sought and obtained legislative relief from the State, and they are doing so again. To enhance safety, they have pledged to insulate more power lines and strengthen more poles. They have also adopted the simple expedience of shutting down power service to customers in high wind areas. In fact in the same week the Woolsey fire raged, SCE sent out two-dozen notices warning they may shut off power.

The first two actions, insulating power lines and strengthening poles are insufficient. The third, shutting off power, may afford better protection to the utility than to its customers whose safety is further threatened by the loss of essential power to pump water to put out fires, to operate garage doors, wheel chairs, elevators, telephones and other communication devices. Yet the one solution the utilities are not offering is the most effective: undergrounding power lines in fire prone areas.

Power lines strung overhead between poles have been the norm for almost a century. Presumably they were the best infrastructure choice at the inception of electrical service. But

yesterday's technology poses an unacceptable risk in today's world as more homes are built at the wildland-urban interface, and as high winds and prolonged drought bring increasingly larger and more destructive wildfires. Undergrounding is not only the most durable safeguard against power line ignited fires, it also protects us from the added danger of downed poles and wires blocking escape routes, impeding mobility and slowing the return to normal life.

We understand it is more expensive to underground transmission lines, close to \$3 million per mile, than other less effective measures. But as the magnitude of the fires has increased, so have the damage costs. Clearly, where overhead power lines are upwind of neighborhoods that are consistently threatened from fires stoked by Santa Ana winds, we can't afford not to underground lines. And while initially expensive, we can hold down costs by undergrounding only where most needed and installing other resiliency measures like battery storage and local generation sources at homes and critical facilities. Together, the long-term benefits of these investments will extinguish once and for all the potential of another power line setting off another inferno.

Currently, the California Public Utilities Commission is considering changes to its undergrounding rules to facilitate more utility-sponsored undergrounding, and undergrounding is often required as a condition of new development. As the federal government considers funding large-scale forest management efforts to remove fuel, we believe removing what ignites the fuel by funding undergrounding of power lines, is one of the best ways to reduce the risk from the one type of wildfire we can prevent.