

# Power lines keep sparking fires. Why don't utility companies bury more lines?

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**  
Capital Press

Pacific Gas and Electric, a utility company serving 16 million Californians, plans to bury 10,000 miles of power lines throughout Northern California to reduce wildfire risk at a cost of up to \$20 billion.

The move, critics say, is long overdue. PG&E's equipment, according to a Wall Street Journal investigation, has ignited more than 20 wildfires in the past several years, burning thousands of homes and killing more than 100 people. Most of the fires started when trees touched power lines.

Besides starting wildfires, overhead lines are vulnerable to ice and wind storms. Last winter, for example, an ice storm knocked out power in some parts of Oregon's Willamette Valley for days.

"We know that we have long argued that undergrounding was too expensive," Patti Poppe, PG&E's chief executive, told reporters. "This is where we say it's too expensive not to underground. Lives are on the line."

Now, rural communities across the West are posing the same question to their utility companies: Since power lines are a fire hazard and cause other problems,

why not bury them?

Undergrounding has drawbacks, utility companies say. With power lines underground, faults are difficult to locate. Underground wires are expensive to install, susceptible to floods, earthquakes and accidental dig-ins, and can prove difficult to repair.

But advocates of burying power lines say the benefits far outweigh costs.

Some utility companies are aggressively burying lines, while others are hesitant. The two biggest barriers to change, experts say, are environmental regulations and insufficient funding.

The Capital Press contacted several major utility companies in the region about their plans.

Oregon-based Portland General Electric already has more than half of its system underground, according to spokeswoman Andrea Platt.

PGE doesn't have plans for a mass-scale undergrounding effort, but Platt said the company, which serves about 90,000 customers, is "always evaluating where additional undergrounding could help mitigate risks."

Platt said there isn't a "single, silver-bullet solution" to protecting lines. PGE is clearing trees and brush near lines, installing fire-resistant poles,



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

**Power lines run through farmland. More electric utilities are considering burying them in the wake of catastrophic fires that have been linked to overhead lines.**

inspecting high-risk areas and piloting new technologies.

The challenge, Platt said, is balancing the cost of burying power lines with the impact on consumer prices.

"We try to be judicious," she said.

Running lines underground, according to the California Public Utility Commission, costs about 10 times as much as overhead lines, translating into higher utility rates.

A price hike could hurt consumers. Rural households across the U.S. already pay 40% more than their metropolitan counterparts on their energy bills, according to a 2018 joint study from the American Council for an

Energy-Efficient Economy and the Energy Efficiency for All Coalition.

California's PG&E, for example, will pass some portion of its \$20 billion price tag on to customers. Paul Doherty, a PG&E spokesman, said the company "will leverage customer and public funding."

Pacific Power, a division of PacifiCorp, is another major West Coast utility serving 780,000 customers across Washington, Oregon and California.

Victims of last September's Beachie Creek fire east of Salem have sued the utility seeking more than \$1 billion. They allege the utility failed

to shut down its power lines even though a strong wind storm had been forecast.

According to spokesman Drew Hanson, about 30% of Pacific Power's Oregon distribution lines are already underground, a percentage that continues growing.

"Going underground more is an evaluated option, but it's not a cure-all," said Hanson.

Hanson said burying wires can be challenging due to soil conditions, limited accessibility and rugged terrain. Filing environmental impact reports and getting approval to cross private land are also obstacles.

To mitigate wildfire risk, the company is putting synthetic coating on wires, replacing wood with steel poles and clearing vegetation in high-risk areas more often. This year, Pacific Power also hired three meteorologists and two emergency staff.

PNGC Power, an umbrella organization for 15 member-owned cooperative utilities across Oregon, said its public utility district members, or PUDs, are all busy creating wildfire plans.

"Since it's a huge topic of conversation right now, they're all speaking about it," said Andrew Barter, a spokesman for PNGC Power.

James Ramseyer, member services director for

Consumers Power Inc., a not-for-profit rural electric cooperative serving Benton, Lane, Lincoln, Linn, Marion and Polk counties in Oregon's Willamette Valley, said about a third of his company's lines are underground and he expects that number to continue climbing.

Consumers Power hopes to underground 70% of its wires in high-risk fire zones by 2022, but Ramseyer said the company faces two main obstacles: painstaking environmental reviews and insufficient funding.

Some county-level utilities are also pushing fire mitigation efforts.

Lane Electric Cooperative, serving 14 towns and cities in Western Oregon, currently has more than half its system underground, higher than the national average, and buries more every year.

According to Debi Wilson, general manager, Lane Electric is applying for federal grants to build more fire-resilient systems, especially in the McKenzie River Valley, which was ravaged by last year's Holiday Farm Fire.

Any solutions, undergrounding or otherwise, will take time, so officials encourage rural communities to have backup generators and emergency plans for summer 2021.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

**Five horses have been diagnosed with the West Nile virus in Idaho.**

## Equine West Nile Virus confirmed across Idaho

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture has confirmed five cases of Equine West Nile virus.

The department's Animal Health Laboratory confirmed one case each in Lemhi, Twin Falls, Canyon, Ada and Blaine counties. The horse in Lemhi County was euthanized due to the severity of the disease. The others are recovering under veterinarians' supervision.

State Veterinarian Scott Leiblsle on Aug. 20 said the cases surfaced in the last 7-10 days.

Drought kept mosquito populations at bay this year, he said in an interview.

"Typically we would see cases of West Nile in horses early in the summer, if we had normal rainfall," Leiblsle said.

Some horse owners haven't been as vigilant about vaccinations this year, he said.

"Ultimately, the prevention for this is vaccination — ideally in the spring, before mosquito hatches occur and mosquito populations have a chance to establish themselves," Leiblsle said.

Nearly 98% of horses that test positive are unvaccinated or under-vacci-

nated, he said. The vaccine has been available for about 20 years.

Leiblsle said more cases of Equine West Nile are occurring around the West recently. Unlike a respiratory virus, it cannot be transmitted from one horse to another.

He said veterinarians can advise horse owners on Equine West Nile and other annual core vaccinations and booster schedules.

Horses that have been vaccinated for West Nile must receive an annual booster, he said.

ISDA said horse owners also should take precautions such as using fans or repellants, and removing standing water where possible.

The virus is commonly spread to people and horses by a mosquito bite. Signs in horses include fever, weakness, unusual movements or even an inability to stand or move.

There is no vaccine for people.

In Oregon, the West Nile virus has been found in mosquitos in Baker and Jackson counties.

In Washington, it has been found in mosquitos in Walla Walla County.

Reporter Mia Ryder-Marks contributed to this story.

## Drought takes toll on Idaho crop yields

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

As drought continues to grip the West, Minnesota and the Dakotas, the American Farm Bureau Federation has been checking in with its members to see how they are faring.

Its latest report assessing conditions focuses on Idaho, where 88% of the state is experiencing drought. Of that, 58% is experiencing extreme or exceptional drought.

"Record high temperatures, rising consecutive days without rainfall and a record number of days with triple-digit heat have been commonplace throughout the 2021 growing season," the Idaho Farm Bureau reported.

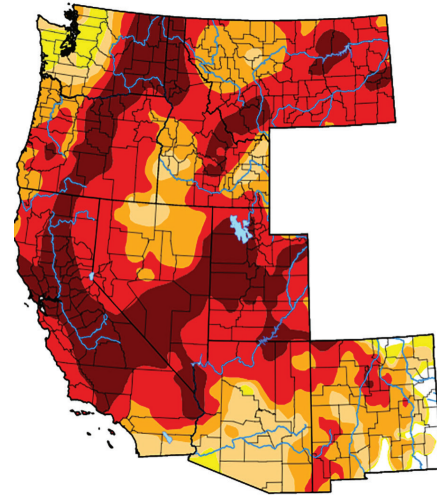
No stranger to dry conditions, the average annual precipitation for much of the state's most populous and productive lands is less than 12 inches. This year has been especially dry and hot, with hydrologists recording average rainfall of about 4.4 inches.

Even the northern region, which commonly receives significantly more rainfall than other regions, is experiencing exceptionally dry conditions, Farm Bureau stated.

Tom Mosman, a dryland canola and wheat farmer in the Camas Prairie region of north central Idaho, said he typically gets 70 to 80 bushels of wheat per acre.

"This year if we average 40 or 50, we will be doing good," he said.

Northern Idaho and Eastern Oregon farmer Travis Port, who grows hay and winter



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peas, said he's expecting about 200 pounds of peas per acre — compared to average yields of nearly 2,000 pounds. He estimates his hay production at half of normal.

"Certainly, farmers and ranchers without access to developed water reserves who are dependent on precipitation and snowpack have really been devastated," Farm Bureau said.

Agricultural lands with access to water reserves such as reservoirs, lakes and aquifers have a better chance of getting through this growing season.

But significant conservation and curtailment have already begun. Some reservoirs, such as those in the Wood and Lost River basins, are below 7% of total capacity — prompting some water managers to stop water deliveries.

Many other reservoirs have dropped below 50% capacity.

As of Aug. 22, Arrowrock Reservoir is at 24% and Mann Creek is at 21% in the West

Central Basins. In the Upper Snake River Basin, Island Park Reservoir is at 43% capacity and American Falls is at 14%, according to the Bureau of Reclamation.

Many irrigation districts have issued shutdown warnings for September — over a month before the usual cutoff, Farm Bureau reported.

On the broader front, nearly 80% of the West plus Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota are experiencing severe drought. That's an increase from 68.5% the week of June 17 and a sizeable jump from the 34% a year earlier.

More than 90% of California, Montana, North Dakota, Nevada, Oregon and Utah is in severe drought or worse.

The full impact of the multi-year drought in the West remains to be seen, but it will be clearer as more crops are harvested and livestock are brought off the range, Farm Bureau said.

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