



Balloons can be beautiful — and hazardous

Bonneville Power Administration

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PORTLAND, Ore. - It's a warm summer day. A clown at a local fair is handing out colorful balloons to passersby. On a whim, someone lets a bunch loose to watch the cluster drift lazily into the sky and disappear.

What they don't know is that sometimes harmless balloons can become a life-threatening hazard when they "disappear" near power lines.

"People don't realize what a problem balloons can be," said Walt Banker, BPA's line maintenance foreman for Vancouver, Wash. "It's not just the metallic balloons. Any balloon can be a hazard."

Four members of his crew spent 10 hours in early July, at a cost of about \$2,500, clearing balloons entangled in a 230,000-volt power line while the line was energized - a treacherous feat considering 220 volts are more than enough to kill a grown man. Electricity demand was too high to shut off the line or reroute the power to other lines.

A long streamer on one of the balloons was dragging down to a sidewalk. "All we needed was a little rain and that streamer would have become the equivalent of a high-voltage power line," Banker said. Metallic balloons have been known to conduct electricity even on dry days.

Typically, balloons cause problems only when they are released in large numbers or, like kites, they trail long streamers.

"We'd just like folks to use a little common sense," Banker said.

Citizens are encouraged to call the Bonneville Power Administration at 1-800-437-2744 if they spot balloons, kites or any other hazard on power lines in their area.

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