



Recent power outages caused by trees

Property owners can take steps to help prevent future tree-caused outages

Bonneville Power Administration

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PORTLAND, Ore. - The widespread power outage that impacted nine western states Saturday, Aug. 10, proves that people were not the only ones wilting from the heat, so were power lines.

Trees have grown quickly this year as a result of an unusually wet spring. This, coupled with the recent high temperatures that made area power lines sag, caused electricity to jump or “flash-over” from those lines to nearby trees. The Bonneville Power Administration is asking property owners who plant and prune trees near power lines to help reduce outages by keeping trees safely distanced from all power lines.

“The tremendous amount of tree and brush growth this year means that removing hazards on the transmission line right-of-ways is essential,” said Gary Parks, a regional manager of BPA field services based in Vancouver, Wash. “Citizens can help by calling us if they notice trees are growing too close to a line or if trees are showing physical signs of potential problems such as burnt tops.”

Preliminary investigations show events leading to the Aug. 10 outage included several flash-over events on 500-kilovolt (kv) power lines between the cities of The Dalles, Ore. and Portland, Ore.; John Day, Ore., and Salem, Ore., and Hillsboro, Ore., and Longview, Wash. These flash-over events were caused, in part, by trees that exceeded height restrictions.

In addition to helping BPA keep electricity flowing reliably, citizens who keep an eye on their trees can help the region maintain low electricity rates.

“Trees don’t have to cut off power to become a problem,” said Darrel VanCoevering, BPA system operations manager. “In many cases, they can cause damage to electrical equipment. That means we must replace or repair equipment — which winds up being more costly for electricity users.”

In addition to the high costs and inconveniences posed by tree-related power outages, human health and safety can be threatened by these types of outages as well. Fire departments, police and hospitals are all dependent upon a reliable supply of electricity to be able to respond to emergencies. A tree-caused outage can harm individuals near power lines, and widespread wildfires from tree-caused outages can endanger the lives of thousands of people. Additionally, individuals on life support devices also are threatened by these electrical outages, and there are many dangers and inconveniences caused by outages to traffic lights.

Safely growing trees and shrubs can make the difference between beautiful landscapes and dangerous hazards that could potentially affect millions of people. And since removing trees near power lines can be a hazard in itself, only trained experts should undertake that task, said VanCoevering.

BPA has developed a “Danger Tree” program to promote transmission line safety and assist property owners with their responsibility to keep trees and vegetation a safe distance from power lines and equipment. The program offers inspections and maintenance work to owners of property with potential power hazards along BPA high-voltage lines.

“Citizen involvement is essential for general electrical safety, and it’s needed to make the Danger Tree program effective,” says BPA transmission line manager Randy Melzer. “As people take advantage of warm weather for recreation or yard work, they can easily avoid danger by being aware of power lines.”

Potential problems can be prevented by following these simple rules when planting trees on property near BPA-owned power lines:

- apply for a BPA planting permit when planting trees or shrubs near power equipment
- don’t plant within 30 feet of towers, poles or ground-based electrical structures
- limit trees and shrubs in these areas to no more than 20 feet in height
- choose trees that are able to withstand Northwest storm conditions
- never plant a tree directly beneath a power line

Each year, trees that have fallen, have been cut, or were improperly planted cause dozens of outages that affect electric utility customers and threaten public safety. In the past year, 18 percent of the tree-caused outages on the BPA power system in the region were the result of human action — either from trees being cut or from growing trees too close to the lines.

Call 1-800-622-4520 for more information or to receive the following brochures:

[Living and Working Safely Around High-Voltage Power Lines](#)

[Landowner’s Guide to Trees and Transmission Lines](#)

[Landowner’s Guide to Use of BPA Right-of-Way](#)

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