

# LIVING AND WORKING SAFELY

AROUND HIGH-VOLTAGE  
POWER LINES



High-voltage power lines can be just as safe as the electrical wiring in our homes — or just as dangerous. The key is learning to act safely around them.

This booklet is a basic safety guide for those who live and work around power lines. It deals primarily with nuisance shocks caused by induced voltages and with possible electric shock hazards from contact with high-voltage lines.

In preparing this booklet, the Bonneville Power Administration has drawn on more than 70 years of experience with high-voltage power lines. BPA operates one of the world's largest networks of long-distance, high-voltage lines, ranging from 69,000 volts to 500,000 volts. This system has more than 200 substations and more than 15,000 miles of power lines.

BPA's lines make up the main electrical grid for the Pacific Northwest. The grid delivers large blocks of power to substations located near load centers. Public and investor-owned utilities and rural cooperatives take delivery of the power at these points and deliver it to the ultimate customers.

BPA's lines cross all types of property: residential, agricultural, industrial, commercial and recreational.

If you have questions about safe practices near power lines, call BPA.

Due to safety considerations many of the practices suggested in this booklet are restrictive. This is because they attempt to cover all possible situations, and the worst conditions are assumed. In certain circumstances, the restrictions can be re-evaluated. To determine what practices are applicable to your case, contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619 or email [realtyinfo@bpa.gov](mailto:realtyinfo@bpa.gov).

## USING THE RIGHT-OF-WAY

Before a power line is built, BPA negotiates with the landowner for the right to cross the land as required for the construction, operation and maintenance of the line. Usually, BPA acquires right-of-way rights to construct, operate and maintain a power line and the right to keep the right-of-way clear of all structures, fire hazards, vegetation and any other use that may interfere with the operation or maintenance of the line. Most crops, less than 10 feet in height, can be grown safely under power lines. Orchards, Christmas trees and structure-supported crops (i.e., trellises) require special consideration.

Call BPA if you plan to use the right-of-way for any use.

BPA's "Landowner's Guide for Compatible Use of BPA Rights-of-Way" explains how to apply for permission to use a portion of a BPA right-of-way for approved purposes. This document can be found online at [www.bpa.gov/land](http://www.bpa.gov/land) or by contacting BPA at 1-800-836-6619.

Construction and maintenance of any structures are specifically prohibited within a BPA right-of-way. Coordinating with BPA early in your planning process can keep you safe and avoid wasting time and money.

## GENERAL SAFE PRACTICES

BPA designs and maintains its facilities to meet or exceed the rules set forth in the National Electrical Safety Code. BPA provides information on safe practices because serious accidents involving power lines can be avoided if simple precautions are taken. Every kind of electrical installation — from the 110-volt wiring in your home to a 500,000-volt power line — must be treated with respect.

The most significant risk of injury from a power line is the danger of electrical contact. Electrical contact between an object on the ground and an energized wire can occur even though the two do not actually touch. In the case of high-voltage lines, electricity can arc across an air gap. The gap distance varies with the voltage at which the line is operated.

Unlike the wiring in a home, the wires of overhead power lines are not enclosed by electrical insulating material.



*Most crops, less than 10 feet in height, can be grown safely under power lines.*

The most important safe practice is this:

**Avoid bringing yourself, or any object you are holding, too close to an overhead power line.**

In other words, do not lift, elevate, build or pass under a power line with any object, equipment, facility or vehicle that could come close to the energized wires.

BPA does not recommend that anyone attempt to calculate how close they can come to a power line. As a general precaution, when under a line, never put yourself or any object any higher than 14 feet above the ground.

The National Electrical Safety Code specifies a minimum safe clearance for each operating voltage. BPA builds its lines so the clearance between the wires of a power line and the ground meets or exceeds the minimum safe clearance set forth in the

code. Therefore, do not alter the ground elevation; without first applying to BPA, call 1-800-836-6619 to ensure safe distances are maintained.

Vehicles and large equipment that do not extend more than 14 feet in height, such as harvesting combines, cranes, derricks and booms, can be operated safely under all BPA lines that pass over roads, driveways, parking lots, cultivated fields or grazing lands.

For your safety, coordinate with BPA if you need to exceed the 14-foot limitation.

## POSSIBLE SHOCK HAZARDS

The previous section discussed dangerous electrical contact conditions that can occur when getting too close to the high-voltage wires. This section will discuss the possible electrical shock hazards that can occur when touching transmission towers or metallic objects near the power line but away from the high-voltage wires.

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*Farm equipment or large machinery 14 feet or less in height may be operated safely under all BPA lines in cultivated fields.*



These types of shocks are caused by a voltage induced from the power line into the nearby metallic objects. Typically the shocks can be avoided when the nearby metallic objects are grounded or connected to earth. The severity of these shocks depends on the operating voltage of the power line, the distance from the conductor, the size or length of the object, its orientation to the line and how well the object is grounded. Normally, shocks do not occur when BPA's guidance is followed (see the following sections). However, under certain conditions, non-hazardous nuisance shocks can still occur and possibly cause discomfort.

The severity of nuisance shocks can vary in sensation from something similar to a shock you might receive when you cross a carpet and then touch a door knob to touching the spark-plug ignition wires on your lawnmower or car. The nuisance shock, however, would be continuous as long as you are touching the metallic object. Such objects include vehicles, fences, metal buildings or roofs and irrigation systems that are near the line or parallel the line for some distance.

## IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

All types of irrigation systems have been operated safely near BPA power lines for years. Nonetheless, caution should be used in storing, handling and installing irrigation pipe, and in operating spray irrigation systems near power lines.

To avoid electrical contact with power lines, two very important safety practices should be observed at all times:



*Irrigation pipe should be moved in a horizontal position under and near all power lines to keep it away from the lines overhead.*

1. While moving irrigation pipe under or near power lines, keep the equipment in a horizontal position to keep it away from overhead wires.
2. Electricity can be conducted through water so never allow the irrigation system to spray a continuous stream onto power lines or towers.

In addition, central pivot circular irrigation systems installed near or under power lines can develop hazardous shock potentials during operation and maintenance. To eliminate these hazards:

- Provide a good electrical ground for the pivot point.
- Do not touch the sprinkler pipe or its supporting structures when the system is operating under or parallel to and near a power line.
- Perform repairs/maintenance of the system with the sprinkler pipe perpendicular to the power line.

For more information on storing, handling, installing or operating an irrigation system on BPA rights-of-way and to apply to use BPA's right-of-way please contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619.

A copy of "Guidelines for Installation and Operation of Irrigation Systems" will be provided when you contact BPA for approval. This document describes methods for safely installing and operating an irrigation system under high-voltage power lines. This document also can be obtained at [www.bpa.gov/land](http://www.bpa.gov/land).

*The possibility of nuisance shocks can be eliminated by grounding metal pipe when unloading near BPA lines.*



## UNDERGROUND PIPES, TELEPHONE CABLES AND ELECTRIC CABLES

Underground pipes and cables may be compatible with power lines provided installation and maintenance are done properly. Pipes and cables should not be installed closer than 50 feet to a BPA tower, any associated guy wires or grounding systems. These grounding systems are long, buried wires that are sometimes attached to the structures and can run up to 300 feet along the right-of-way. These grounding systems are not visible above ground and must be located before installing any underground utilities.

Proper positioning of underground utilities is required to prevent an accident in an extreme case when an unusual condition might cause electricity to arc from the high-voltage wire to the tower and then to ground. This could produce a dangerous voltage on underground piping or cable system. Contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619 to apply before installing any underground utilities within a BPA power line right-of-way.

## FENCES

BPA strongly discourages locating fences within the right-of-way as they can cause a potential safety hazard and an access problem (particularly in high-density subdivisions). Contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619 if you are interested in submitting an application to place a fence on the right-of-way using the guideline that the location must be a



minimum of 50 feet from BPA structures as well as other considerations discussed below.

## WIRE FENCES

Barbed wire and woven wire fences insulated from ground on wood posts can assume an induced voltage when located near power lines. If you are having a shock-related problem, call BPA for an investigation. The fence may need to be grounded if:

- it is located within the right-of-way;
- it parallels the line within 125 feet of the outside wire and is longer than 150 feet; or
- it parallels the line 125 to 250 feet from the outside wire and is longer than 6,000 feet.

These fences should be grounded at each end and every 200 feet with a metal post driven at least 2 feet into the ground. Attach all wire strands of the fence to the metal post. Install the grounding

posts at least 50 feet from the nearest transmission tower. If shocks are experienced when contacting a fence or gate, or if you have any questions about the need for grounding, call BPA at 1-800-836-6619.

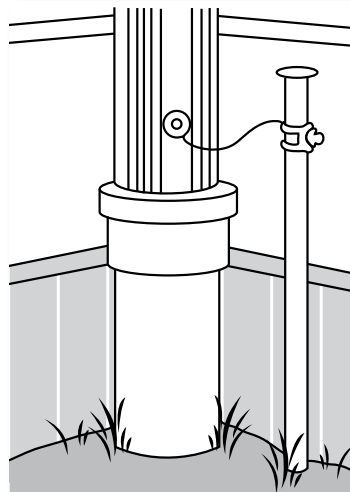
## ELECTRIC FENCES

In situations where a fence cannot be grounded (electric fences, for example), a filter may be installed to remove voltages induced by the power lines. BPA may provide this filter after an investigation has been conducted. Do not use fence chargers that are not approved by Underwriters' Laboratories, Inc. They may carry voltages and currents that are hazardous to anyone touching the fence — even if power lines are not present. For more information about fences, fence chargers or filters, call BPA at 1-800-836-6619.

## BUILDINGS

This section applies to buildings outside BPA's rights-of-way, since BPA prohibits buildings within a right-of-way.

Buildings located off BPA's rights-of-way may collect an induced voltage. This voltage is often drained through the building's plumbing, electrical service, metal sheeting or metal frame. If the



*Example of grounding a metal building at a down spout.*

voltage does not drain through the systems described above, then it can result in a nuisance shock situation.

Grounding metallic components on buildings near a power line may help reduce nuisance shocks, here are some situations where this may apply:

- the building is within 100 feet of the outside wire;
- the building has more than 2,000 square feet of metal surface and is within 100 to 150 feet of the outside wire; or
- the building is used to store flammable materials and is within 250 feet of the outside wire.

Call BPA at 1-800-836-6619 if you are having shock-related problems or if you have any additional questions.

## VEHICLES

Under some high-voltage lines, vehicles can collect an induced voltage. This is particularly true if the vehicle is parked on a nonconductive surface such as asphalt or dry rock. You can drain the voltage from your vehicle to the ground by attaching a chain that reaches the ground or by leaning a metal bar against your vehicle. The only way to be sure you won't get shocked is to park your car away from the high-voltage power line.

BPA has specific restrictions for parking and roads within the right-of-way to keep possible shocks at a low level. Contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619 to apply before locating roads and parking areas within the BPA right-of-way.

Refueling vehicles is not allowed on BPA rights-of-way because there is a chance that a spark from an induced voltage could ignite the fuel.

## LIGHTNING

Lightning will usually strike the highest nearby object, which might be a power line tower or wire. Transmission facilities are designed to withstand lightning strikes by channeling them to ground at the tower.

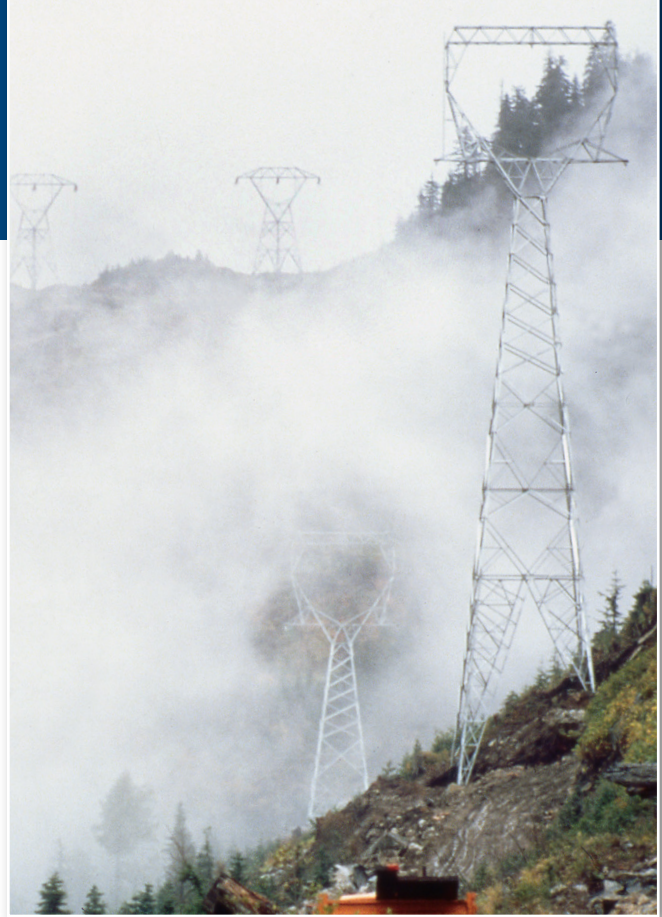
Play it safe. Stay away from power lines and other tall objects during electrical storms. Lightning is dangerous if you are standing near where it enters the ground.

## FIRES

Smoke and hot gases from a large fire can create a conductive path for electricity. When a fire is burning under a power line, electricity could arc from the wire, through the smoke and to the ground, endangering people and objects near the arc. BPA does not permit burning within the right-of-way.

Field burning and other large fires in and around power lines can damage power lines and cause power outages. Water and other chemicals used to extinguish those fires should never be directed toward a power line.

Contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619 if you need to burn near a BPA right-of-way.



*A fire burning under a power line can create a dangerous situation. Stay away from lines if a fire is nearby.*

## KITE FLYING AND MODEL AIRPLANES

BPA strongly discourages anyone from flying a kite or model airplane anywhere near a power line. The electricity from the line can travel through the string or hand line and electrocute a person on the other end. If your kite or model airplane is about to touch a power line, drop the string or hand line instantly, before it touches the line. Do not try to pull the kite or airplane down or climb up after it. Call the nearest electric utility.

## VANDALISM, SHOOTING AND TRESPASSING

People entering high-voltage electrical facilities, such as substations and power line rights-of-way, for the purpose of vandalism or theft, run the risk



of serious injury or death. For example, when hunting, do not shoot at transmission facilities. Gunshot damage can cause flashovers or may cause the wire to fall to the ground. This could be a serious hazard to anyone close to the power line. It could also cause a power outage and a fire.

Removal of equipment from substations or power line facilities can result in unsafe operating conditions and put people nearby at risk of serious injury or death. Those who cause willful damage to BPA transmission facilities or associated property can be prosecuted by the federal government, the property owner, or both.

Please report damage to transmission facilities to BPA's Crime Witness Program at 1-800-437-2744. The Crime Witness Program allows you to confidentially report an illegal activity that you witness against BPA's transmission system, property or personnel. This includes:

- Shooting at power lines, transmission towers or substation equipment.
- Dumping any waste or material on BPA property.
- Vandalism to BPA property, buildings and vehicles.
- Theft of BPA equipment, supplies, tools or materials.

This program offers rewards of up to \$25,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrator(s).



## TALL OBJECTS

### Facilities

Temporary or permanent facilities within the right-of-way such as, light standards, signs, above-ground utilities, etc., can create unsafe situations when constructed too close to BPA power lines and structures. Permissible heights for such facilities can vary depending on site specific conditions. Call BPA at 1-800-836-6619 to apply for these uses.

### Activities

As a precautionary practice, do not raise any metal object more than 14 feet in the air underneath a power line. For example, when you mount an antenna on a vehicle that you plan to operate on a BPA right-of-way, do not let it extend more than 14 feet above the ground.

Before you sail a boat on a lake or river, check the allowable clearance under any power line. We recommend that all masts or guy wires above the deck be connected electrically to an underwater metallic part such as the keel or centerboard.

This precaution, which protects against lightning or accidental contact with a power line, may save your life.

Remember, if you plant, dig or build within the right-of-way an application is required. Any activities or use with a reach capacity greater than 14 feet (eg. cranes, dump trucks, irrigation systems, etc.) may cause safety concerns. Please specifically identify these uses and equipment in your application. Contact BPA to apply at 1-800-836-6619.

## POOLS

BPA does not permit the building of swimming pools within BPA rights-of-way because it impedes our ability to operate and maintain the power line and presents a potential safety hazard to the public. Hazards range from possible electrical contact with the wires (with pool skimmers or rescue poles, for example) to dangers that can be encountered during and after lightning strikes on transmission facilities.

## CLIMBING

Climbing on power line towers or guy wires can be extremely hazardous. Do not do it under any circumstance. It is dangerous and illegal.

## PACEMAKERS

Under some circumstances, voltages and currents from power lines and electrical devices can interfere with the operation of some implanted cardiac pacemakers. However, we know of no case where a BPA line has harmed a pacemaker patient.



*Cutting trees within power line rights-of-way can be dangerous. It is safer to have BPA do it for you.*

As a precaution, people who may have reason to be very near high-voltage facilities should consult with a physician to determine whether their particular implant may be susceptible to power line interference.

If a person with a pacemaker is in an electrical environment and the pacemaker begins to produce a regularly spaced pulse that is not related to a normal heartbeat, the person should leave the environment and consult a physician.

## TREES AND LOGGING

No logging or tree cutting should be done within BPA's right-of-way without first contacting BPA at 1-800-836-6619 to apply. In many cases, BPA owns the timber within its rights-of-way.

Additionally, logging or tree cutting near power lines can be very hazardous and requires special caution. Since trees conduct electricity, if one should fall into or close to a power line, the current could follow the tree trunk to the ground and endanger anyone standing near its base. Here are two simple rules:

1. If you come upon a tree that has fallen into a power line, stay away from it.
2. If you accidentally cause a tree to fall into a power line, run for your life! Do not go back to retrieve your saw or equipment. Call BPA or your local utility immediately.

If you have trees either on or close to the right-of-way that need to be cut, contact BPA at 1-800-836-6619. It is unsafe to do it yourself.

Since power line rights-of-way usually are not owned by BPA but are acquired through easements from landowners, trees or logs stacked within or alongside the rights-of-way are not public property. People removing trees and logs without permission are stealing and can be prosecuted.

## EXPLOSIVES

If you plan to detonate explosives near a BPA power line, apply to BPA well in advance by calling 1-800-836-6619 or find the contact information for your local office at [www.bpa.gov/land](http://www.bpa.gov/land). BPA will tell you if any special precautionary measures must be taken at a particular blasting site.

Any blasting near or within BPA rights-of-way must not damage any BPA facilities or permitted uses within the rights-of-way. Do not use electric detonating devices when blasting within 1,000 feet of a power line. Use of non-electric methods of detonation will avoid the danger of accidentally discharging an electric blasting cap due to induced voltages from energized transmission facilities.

## TOWERS AND WIRES

- Do not climb towers.
- Do not shoot or otherwise damage transmission facilities.
- Never touch a fallen wire.
- Do not attempt to dismantle towers.
- Do not attach anything to towers.
- Stay away from towers and lines during extreme windstorms, thunderstorms, ice storms or under other extreme conditions.

Preventive measures include:

- Report any suspicious activities to BPA at 1-800-437-2744 or to your nearest electrical utility.
- Stay away from and report damage to transmission facilities to BPA at 1-800-437-2744 or your nearest electrical utility.
- Stay away from and report broken, damaged or abnormally low-hanging wires to BPA at 1-800-437-2744 or your nearest electrical utility.



## CONCLUSION

We live in an age of electric power. Almost everything we do requires it. Consequently, high-voltage power lines have become about as commonplace as the wiring in our homes. Nevertheless, every year people are killed or seriously injured by power lines and home wiring. In almost every case, lives could have been saved and injuries avoided if the basic safety practices outlined in this booklet had been followed. BPA and your local utilities make every effort to design and build power lines that are safe to live and work around. Ultimately, however, the safety of high-voltage lines depends on people behaving safely around them. No line can practicably be made safe from a person who, through ignorance or foolishness, violates the basic principles of safety. Please take time now to learn the practices outlined in this booklet and share your knowledge with your family, friends and colleagues. Your own life, or that of a loved one, might well hang in the balance.

## RELATED BPA PUBLICATIONS AND GUIDELINES

For more information, call BPA at 1-800-836-6619 for the following publications:

1. **“Landowner’s Guide for Compatible Use of BPA Rights-of-Way”** (DOE/BP-3657)
2. **“Landowner’s Guide to Trees and Trans-mission Lines”** (DOE/BP-3076)
3. **“Keeping the Way Clear for Better Service”** (DOE/BP-2816)
4. **“Guidelines for Installation and Operation of Irrigation Systems”**

These documents also can be found at [www.bpa.gov/land](http://www.bpa.gov/land).

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