

Support Prompt Implementation of Omnibus Vegetation Management Provisions

Key Findings

- The 2018 Omnibus spending bill included provisions designed to allow electric cooperatives to more easily manage vegetation and remove hazard trees along utility rights-of-way on federal lands.
- Federal agencies were initially told to implement the Omnibus provisions by proposing regulatory changes in March 2019 and finalizing the changes by March 2020; however, implementation has been delayed.
- Electric co-ops face uncertainty and increased wildfire risk until agencies implement changes and adequately train field staff.

Omnibus Vegetation Management Provisions are a Positive Step

In March 2018, Congress enacted the Omnibus spending bill which includes key provisions to improve electric cooperative operations. The law helps bolster co-op system reliability and reduce wildfire risk by improving access to transmission and distribution infrastructure crossing federal lands. These provisions are a positive step for America's electric cooperatives as they work to enhance the quality of life in rural communities across the nation.

But Delayed Implementation is Detrimental to Co-ops and Public Safety

Electric co-ops face continued uncertainty and shoulder the weight of increased wildfire risk until regulatory changes are made and agency field staff are trained. Federal agencies have been instructed to promptly implement the Omnibus provisions. The USDA Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management were initially told to propose regulatory and policy changes by March 2019 and finalize any changes by March 2020. However, the agencies have failed to meet the both of these deadlines.

A consistent and durable adoption of the statutory changes enacted by Congress in the Omnibus is critical as electric co-ops work to enhance grid reliability and reduce the threat of wildfires. But the various agencies take different approaches to implementing these Omnibus vegetation management changes. This may add delays or jeopardize the durability of any changes.

The Forest Service is expected to release a final rule imminently. As the BLM continues to work on a similar proposed rulemaking, it has issued temporary state-specific guidance to allow utilities to conduct vegetation management along rights-of-way to reduce wildfire risk. NRECA continues to press both agencies to quickly finalize and consistently implement these vital vegetation management reform provisions.

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