



Vegetation Management Promotes Energy Grid Reliability

To ensure electric reliability, it is important that electric companies be able to manage vegetation near energy infrastructure located on federal lands. Maintaining rights-of-way (ROWs) also increases public safety and provides environmental benefits by promoting healthier forests. The electric power industry supports congressional efforts to facilitate vegetation management on federal lands, including management of hazardous and high-risk vegetation located just outside of ROWs.

Why Vegetation Management Matters

Vegetation management includes inspections and tree trimming, and is a key component of safely operating and maintaining energy grid infrastructure.

The electric power industry—including investor-owned electric companies, public power utilities, and electric cooperatives—is responsible for providing the safe, reliable, and affordable energy that powers the economy and enhances the lives of all Americans. The industry is subject to rigorous, mandatory electricity reliability standards and guidelines developed by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) and approved by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), including standards for vegetation management.

To uphold these standards and to ensure a safe and reliable supply of electricity, as well as to protect their workers, customers, and the environment, electric companies must proactively address potential hazards like trees near energy infrastructure.

Why Legislation Is Needed to Enhance Vegetation Management

Nearly 90,000 miles of electric transmission and distribution lines use ROWs that cross lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Electric companies are responsible for operating, maintaining, and repairing transmission lines and other facilities on federal lands, but they must seek permission from federal land agencies before doing so. Companies are subject to significant fines for violations of the mandatory NERC reliability standards, and could be liable for fires on federal lands caused by vegetation on or adjacent to ROWs.

Following a major 2003 East Coast-Midwest blackout caused by a falling tree, Congress established the statutory framework for NERC reliability standards as part of the 2005 Energy Policy Act (EPAct 05). EPAct 05 also contained a provision intended to ensure that federal agencies expedite any approvals necessary to allow the owners or operators of energy infrastructure to comply with NERC reliability standards pertaining to vegetation management.

Despite the directive in EPAct 05, the vegetation management issue on federal lands has not been resolved. Many power lines crossing federal lands are subject to multiple layers of jurisdiction and decision-making, redundant reviews, and conflicting policies. Electric companies still frequently encounter significant delays in obtaining approvals from federal land management agencies to perform routine vegetation management activities.

Bipartisan Legislation Can Improve Vegetation Management

Congress can address this continuing problem by passing bipartisan legislation to improve vegetation management on federal lands.

In June, the House of Representatives voted 300-118 to pass the LaMalfa-Schrader Electricity Reliability and Forest Protection Act (H.R. 1873), which would provide a more streamlined and consistent process for federal agency approval of vegetation management plans, as well as inspections and remedial work necessary to address imminent problems or to comply with reliability standards. Similar bipartisan legislation passed the House in the 114th Congress.

The Murkowski-Cantwell Energy and Natural Resources Act (S.1460) also contains a provision to address vegetation management issues on federal lands. The Senate energy bill in the 114th Congress did not include vegetation management language, so this represents another positive step forward.

A broad representation of industry and labor groups support vegetation management legislation, including the American Public Power Association; Edison Electric Institute; International Brotherhood of Boilermakers; International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers; International Union of Operating Engineers; Laborer's International Union of North America; Large Public Power Council; National Electrical Contractors Association; National Rural Electric Cooperatives Association; North America's Building Trades Unions; Northwest Public Power Association; United Association of Plumbers, Fitters, Welders and Service Techs; and United Brotherhood of Carpenters.

The electric power industry encourages Congress to build on these bipartisan efforts and enact legislation that will establish a better framework to promote federal land management consistency, accountability, and timely decision-making. Doing so is important to maintaining grid reliability and can be done in a manner that respects the federal land management agencies' role in appropriately managing the lands and sensitive habitats within their respective jurisdictions.

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