

# Creating Fire-Safe Electrical Corridors

## Background:

The Western U.S. is experiencing a disturbing rise in large-scale, catastrophic fires, posing significant challenges to public power utilities. These fires not only impact public health, safety, air quality, and the economy but also undermine widespread investments in emissions reductions. While strides have been made in addressing wildfire risk, a comprehensive federal approach is crucial for further improvement in prevention and mitigation measures. It's imperative to address the genuine financial impacts of wildfires on communities and locally-owned electric utilities.

Public power has consistently advocated for a revamp of federal wildfire management policies to proactively tackle funding challenges. A pressing concern demanding immediate attention is the process for timber removal to mitigate wildfire risk. The existing regulations governing timber removal from federal land were designed to support a sustained yield model for multiple uses. This requires the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to balance various land uses and ensure sustained yield perpetually.

Timber sales, governed by contracts permitting the removal of forest products, involve a formal process where an entity compensates the USFS for cutting and removing specified timber. However, these contracts do not align with the swift and efficient needs of utility operations, especially the urgent need to consistently clear vegetation below utility transmission lines for effective wildfire prevention. Moreover, utilities and federal land agencies agree that the value of the wood waste that remains following vegetation management practices under transmission lines does not have a market value that supports such sale requirements.

*NCPA encourages Congress to incorporate the provisions of the Fire Safe Electrical Corridors Act of 2023 into must-pass legislation, such as the upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Bill, in 2024.*

## Congress Must Take Action to Prevent Wildfires

Congressional intervention is crucial to mitigating wildfire risk by simplifying the process of removing wood waste resulting from vegetation management carried out by electric utilities on USFS lands. Currently, electric utilities can obtain special use permits from the USFS for vegetation management operations, allowing them to fell trees within and around their rights-of-way corridors. However, the existing regulations require utilities to purchase or give away the felled trees through a time-consuming and inefficient timber sale contract, often leaving wood waste on-site.

This process creates unnecessary cost and regulatory obstacles for a vital and time-sensitive utility function essential for public health and safety.

- Congress should amend the statute governing timber sale and disposal on National Forest System lands to empower the USFS to expedite timber removal by electric utilities for wildfire risk mitigation.
- One proposed solution is the H.R. 6012/S. 2269 Fire Safe Electrical Corridors Act of 2023, introduced in both the House and the Senate. This legislation grants the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to permit tree removal around electrical lines on USFS land without the need for a timber sale.
- This legislation is an outgrowth of work being done by both federal agencies and electric utilities across the country through the Department of Energy's Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council on Wildfires. This bill represents an area of consensus for the federal agencies and utilities alike as they collectively support the removal of trees and vegetation by electric utilities along transmission line rights-of-ways on National Forest System land without the continued imposition of cumbersome timber sale restrictions.

