

**Statement of
Jim Peña
Associate Deputy Chief
National Forest System
Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

Before the

**U.S. House of Representatives
House Committee on Natural Resources**

May 7, 2014

Concerning

**“Keeping the Lights on and Reducing Catastrophic Wildfire Risk; Proper
Management of Electricity Rights of way on Federal Lands.”**

Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member DeFazio, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Department of Agriculture’s views on Proper Management of Electricity Rights of Way on National Forest System Lands.

The nearly 193 million acres that comprise the National Forests and National Grasslands are located in 42 states and Puerto Rico and comprises 9 regions of the United States. The Mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands for present and future generations. Electric Transmission line Rights-of-Way across the National Forest System are critical for meeting the needs of the Nation and rural America. The Department is committed to support the resilience and sustainability of rural America and ensure a well maintained

infrastructure is in place to support those communities. The Forest Service permits some 18,000 miles of electrical transmission lines across the National Forest System, ranging from 1 kV residential lines that connect homes to the electric grid to 500 kV transmission lines that move power within and across states.

Forest vegetation in portions of the National Forest System is extremely susceptible to large wildfires, which endanger communities and impact watersheds and pose a considerable threat to power line structures. Today, I will focus on how this risk of wildfire affects utilities, electrical power and the reliability of the electrical grid.

The Agency and utilities have become increasingly concerned about ensuring electricity transmission rights-of-way and the areas just beyond the rights-of-way are appropriately maintained to manage the risk of wildfire. The Forest Service has established a couple of partnerships with electric utilities beyond the rights-of-way limits to implement thinning prescriptions for tree harvest and appropriate natural and activity¹ fuel management to change and reduce the behavior of wildfire adjacent to and near the transmission line. The intent of these treatments is to remove enough of the stand structure so that the residual stand structure causes the fire to drop from the tree canopy to the ground, where the flame lengths are two to four feet and wildland fire crews can safely contain the fire with hand and machine fire line, thereby reducing the risk of line damage and power transmission interruption.

The Agency reports 113 wildfires igniting from direct contact between power lines and trees or the arcing of electricity from the power lines to vegetation in 2013. In 2012, the Agency documented 232 wildfires igniting from power line corridors. Fires that burn into or ignite from power line corridors place a significant economic burden on rate payers and American taxpayers through higher agency fire suppression and rehabilitation costs, industry replacement of damaged power line infrastructure and the cost of

¹ the combustible material resulting from or altered by forestry practices such as timber harvest or thinning
Dictionary of Forestry – Society of American Foresters

purchasing or rerouting power and reliability for local communities, in addition to the loss of power critical for domestic and public service needs

In response to potential wildfire impacts to and from power lines, the Forest Service released in December 2012 a National Desk Guide for vegetation maintenance of electric transmission lines. This document provides guidance for the development of appropriately consistent vegetation management in the Operation and Maintenance plans as required by the permit. A key element of the Desk Guide is a reemphasis of the responsibility of utilities to immediately remove vegetation that poses an imminent threat to power line infrastructure. The National Desk Guide emphasizes that where transmission lines face imminent threat from vegetation, utilities may treat that vegetation without waiting for Forest Service approval; however, notification to the Forest Service is required. Later this year the Department anticipates signing a revised interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Edison Electric Institute which will set consistent vegetation maintenance standards between Federal land management agencies and utilities.

Also, in order to address the challenge of assuring appropriate consistency in managing threats to power lines, the Forest Service continues to meet with the Western Utility Group (WUG) on a regular basis. Between the WUG and the Forest Service a process has been devised and Regional key contacts identified to address issues and concerns with location and project-specific maintenance requirements. In addition, the National Office has an open door policy for addressing issues and concerns that are either interregional or cannot be resolved locally. The Agency Lands and Realty Management Directorate continues to be involved in resolving specific issues and Agency-wide challenges to ensure appropriate consistency and proper right-of-way management. The key to ensuring that power line corridors are well maintained is the development and implementation of operating and maintenance plans. These plans specify and authorize entry and vegetation removal standards needed for long-term permit management. Given current agency funding and staffing capacity, currently, over twenty-five percent of the agency's power line permits are expired and less than half of the permits have current

operating and maintenance plans. The Department has identified energy transmission as a priority within the Agency's Lands and Realty Management budget line and we make as much progress as we can within that capacity. The process for developing a vegetation management plan (part of the operation and maintenance plan) should not be a cumbersome one. While an environmental analysis is required, the agency understands that by issuing the permit, there is an implied commitment to allow the permittee reasonable access and capability to perform their required maintenance within the framework of existing law. These plans should be developed at the time of permit issuance and reviewed annually at the beginning of the maintenance season.

In addition to working proactively with utilities in reducing and eliminating vegetation and fire risks, many forest supervisors work with utilities in wildfire pre-suppression planning. The utilities participate actively as part of a potential wildfire interagency incident management team in wildfire suppression scenario drills and pre-season preparation. The Department's intent is to encourage as much of this type of coordination as possible.

The Department recently embarked on an initiative to look at reducing fire risk beyond the right-of-way limits. The Secretary of Agriculture convened the Western Utilities Summit last spring (2013) with power company executives and state public utility regulators to explore partnership opportunities for increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration and fire mitigation work. Pilot projects where utilities are contributing to reducing their risk and the fire risk within fire-derived ecosystems have begun. As an example, the Xcel energy partnership with national forests of the Colorado Front Range will provide funding for treating the live and dead fuel component of stands outside of the corridor. Furthermore, as a result of the dialogue from the Summit, utilities and regulators, along with the Forest Service, have begun a detailed analysis of the economic benefits of a vegetation-management partnership to companies and rate payers, so they can decide if these investments in forest restoration and fuels reduction beyond the corridor limits are wise investments for their rate payers and investors to manage wildfire risk.

The Department estimates that there are almost 7,000 miles² of transmission lines in the West traversing National Forests with moderate to high fire risk. As drought, extreme heat and high wind conditions persist across large geographic areas; the potential for multiple wildfire events to impact electric reliability is significant. (The States with the most miles of transmission lines traversing high wildfire hazard ecosystems are Arizona and California.)

The Department strongly endorses a robust, well maintained, utility infrastructure to service rural and urban America and is working to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire to both the forests and critical infrastructure. In addition, the liability cost, both social and monetary, associated with wildfire ignitions originating from electricity transportation are a focal point for avoidance and reduction. The Department is actively committed to that goal.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member DeFazio, this concludes my statement and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

² USDA Forest Service.