

**STATEMENT of
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
on
THE VEGETATION MANAGEMENT REQUIREMENTS FOR ELECTRICITY ASSETS
LOCATED ON FEDERAL LANDS
SEPTEMBER 19, 2017**

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee on the USDA Forest Service's work on reducing the threat of wildfires to and from electric transmission and distribution facilities on Federal lands. We also appreciate the opportunity to address H.R. 1873, titled "Electricity Reliability and Forest Protection Act," and Section 2310 of S. 1460, titled "Energy and Natural Resources Act of 2017."

The Forest Service administers approximately 70,000 special use authorizations, including 2,700 authorizations for power lines, covering about 18,000 linear miles. Those facilities serve as critical links in the nation's electrical grid. Fire and service disruptions resulting from contact between vegetation and power lines threaten public safety and resources and can place a burden on rate payers. Helping to ensure authorized structures and adjacent natural resources are maintained in a way that protects them from damage or destruction is an important and challenging part of Agency operations.

The purpose of these bills is to amend the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 to enhance the reliability of the electrical grid and reduce the threat of wildfires to and from electric transmission and distribution facilities on Federal lands by facilitating vegetation management on those lands. We support the goals of these bills.

Most provisions in H.R. 1873 and Section 2310 of S. 1460 would improve the ability of USDA's Forest Service to address these issues in collaboration with electricity providers. However, USDA believes some of the provisions duplicate existing requirements in Forest Service policies and special use authorizations. In addition, the Agency would like to work with you to develop appropriate liability provisions and ensure that utilities can do necessary forest treatments through operating and maintenance plans and coordination with the Forest Service.

The Forest Service is confident that solutions to these concerns exist and that provisions can be established in partnership with Congress and electricity providers to better address forest health and hazardous fuel concerns that threaten the nation's electrical grid.

USDA is aware of the frustrations some utilities experience as a result of delayed responses for maintenance approvals and inconsistency across agency field offices and has been actively taking steps to address these concerns under existing authorities. The Forest Service has taken proactive measures to better address our shared concerns with management vegetation along energy corridors, including:

- Renewing the federal memorandum of understanding on vegetation management for powerline rights-of-way with the Edison Electric Institute.
- Completing a master agreement with Pacific Gas and Electric Company for the immediate removal of hazard trees within striking distance of its powerlines and replacement of deteriorating poles. Pacific Gas and Electric Company has felled 27,000 hazardous trees on National Forests within California.
- Reaching agreement with Bonneville Power Administration on a standard power line permit and operating and maintenance plan for all Bonneville Power Administration facilities on National Forest System lands.
- Disseminating to field units guidance on developing vegetation management plans for electric transmission line permits and easements.

In summary, the Forest Service will continue to work collaboratively with federally owned and privately owned utilities to develop vegetation management plans that allow right-of-way authorization holders to provide reliable service while minimizing the risk of forest fires and complying with applicable Federal, State, and local requirements.

USDA would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee on this legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.