



**Opening Statement
Hearing on Wildfires and Electric Grid Reliability
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
December 19, 2019**

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order. Last hearing of the year here. There's a lot going on this morning so I think we'll have people coming in and out. But, we do have a pretty hard stop at 11:00 am this morning, we've got a series of votes, and we are going to observe an actual ten minute clock. It's the first time in Senate history, but that's the goal this morning. So, we want to be able to hear from everyone this morning, and have an opportunity for the very, very important conversations regarding this issue.

We are here today to discuss the impact of wildfires on the reliability of our electric grid and efforts to mitigate wildfire risk and increase grid resiliency.

In recent years, devastating wildfires and related electricity blackouts in California have drawn national attention to the challenge of maintaining grid resiliency in the face of extreme conditions. Tragically, we remember last year's Camp Fire, the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history, which incinerated the town of Paradise, killed 85 people. State investigators determined that the fire was caused by degraded, 97-year old power lines during so-called 'fire weather' – strong winds, low humidity, dry vegetation, and heat.

The Camp Fire was a sobering wakeup call on the inherent risk of maintaining thousands of miles of above-ground power lines across fire-prone landscapes. It spurred California regulators and several of the state's largest utilities to increase their use of Public Safety Power Shutoffs – or "PSPS plans" – as a precaution against possible wildfire ignitions during high wind events.

Intended as a measure of last resort, PSPS plans call for utilities to de-energize power lines in extreme weather conditions and blackout large portions of their service territory. From June through November, at least nine PSPS events cut power for more than three million Californians. For some, these blackouts lasted a few hours. Others, however, went without power for nearly six days.

These blackouts occurred not only in the rugged terrain of northern California, but also in the greater metro areas of San Francisco, San Diego, and Los Angeles County. Repeat scenarios could be with us for a very long time. According to the testimony we will hear today, wildfire blackouts could be California's new normal for the next 10 to 30 years, or even longer.

One would expect to see such living conditions in a developing county, not in some of the most populated and prosperous places in the United States. And certainly not in a state with some of the highest electricity prices in the nation.

This challenge is not limited to California, however. Dense vegetation and hazard trees interfering with power lines are not an uncommon cause of wildfires. Neither is degraded energy infrastructure. On a national basis, the U.S. Forest Service estimates that more than 277 fires from 2017 to 2018 can be traced to power lines. Several of the fires that merged into the 2016 Great Smoky Mountains Wildfires were started by wind-downed power lines. The Great Smoky Mountains Wildfires were the deadliest in the eastern U.S. since the Great Fires of 1947.

In my home state of Alaska, some fires in the Mat-Su Valley north of Anchorage are believed to be connected to power line ignitions in a region with high spruce bark beetle mortality. An investigation is still pending, but a tree falling onto a distribution line is the suspected cause of the McKinley Fire this summer, which resulted in the loss of 56 homes.

The danger in Alaska, like elsewhere in the nation, is that power lines are necessarily located near homes, schools, and businesses. Climate change, drought, insect infestation, and poor forest management have made forest landscapes more susceptible to fire, particularly in the West. As more people build homes in the wildland-urban interface or in dispersed forest communities, the chances for utility-related wildfires are sure to increase.

In this era of mega-fires, Congress has stepped in to ensure that the federal government is not a roadblock to clearing dense vegetation and hazard trees from utility rights-of-way. In 2018, we passed the Electric Reliability and Forest Protection Act as part of the 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act. That law directs federal land managers to expedite the clearing of vegetation within 100 feet of power line corridors on federal land. It is my understanding that both the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service are now implementing that important measure.

Now, we must turn our attention to what can be done to harden our energy infrastructure and improve the resiliency of our grid in high fire-risk areas during these extreme weather conditions. This is a complex problem that is going to require collaboration at all levels in partnership with the electric industry.

So, I thank those of you that have joined us this morning to provide important this important testimony, I thank my colleagues being here, and I will now turn to friend, Senator Manchin for his comments before we turn to the panel.

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