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BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

JULY 9, 2024

Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Steve Powell, the President, and CEO of Southern California Edison, and I am here today to express support for HR 6012, the Fire Safe Electrical Corridors Act, legislation sponsored by Representatives Salud Carbajal and Lori Chavez-DeRemer.

I want to first share my appreciation to this Committee for its strong commitment to addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfires facing the West and, increasingly, throughout other parts of the United States. As we have all seen, wildfires are growing in frequency and burning with greater intensity.

Furthermore, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the importance of the Fire Safe Electrical Corridors Act, and the role this legislation will play in reducing wildfire threat in our National Forests. Passage of this Bill will encourage preservation of forest lands and enhance wildfire protection. Currently, vegetation mitigation practices on Forest lands do not provide flexibility to remove felled timber and vegetation debris. This is a deficiency that would be addressed by HR 6012.

Southern California Edison is an electric utility that delivers power to 15 million people across Southern, Central and Coastal California. SCE has facilities within eight National Forests, seven of which are managed by the Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5) of the U.S. Forest Service. They include Angeles, Cleveland, Inyo, Los Padres, San Bernardino, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests. This legislation would also have an impact on SCE's work in Humboldt-Toiyabe, which is located in Region 6.

Wildfire mitigation has been an integral part of SCE's operational practices for many years, and we are continuing to strengthen our programs to manage and reduce the risk we face. We have stepped up our comprehensive mitigation efforts and have made substantial progress through our Wildfire Mitigation Plans. Our efforts include hardening the grid, increasing our situational awareness, and improving our operational practices, including vegetation management.

On an annual basis, SCE's vegetation management program inspects roughly 1.6 million trees in our service area, including 745,000 trees located in High Fire Risk Areas. Roughly half of these trees require pruning. In addition, in High Fire Risk Areas, we inspect trees that could pose a hazard by falling or blowing into our electrical assets. Since 2018, our certified arborists have assessed over 400,000 unique trees that potentially pose a hazard, with roughly 5% requiring removal as the form of mitigation. In 2024, we plan to assess approximately 240,000 potentially hazardous trees and mitigate about 7,500 of them.

For Forest Service lands in particular, SCE has historically mitigated approximately 19,000 trees annually. Going forward, SCE anticipates mitigating approximately 10,000 - 15,000 trees annually. However, mitigation volumes may increase, especially following natural disasters such as wildfires, windstorms, or beetle infestations.

For the past several years, the electric utility industry has been working with the federal land management agencies, principally the Forest Service and BLM, to address wildfire risk on federal lands. In 2022, Forest Service Chief Randy Moore formed a government-industry working group to address issues like streamlining the permitting process to allow utilities to perform wildfire mitigation activities more quickly and efficiently. Despite much progress, the working group continues to face regulatory challenges which limit the effectiveness of utility wildfire mitigation efforts on federal lands. One of these challenges is how timber felled through wildfire mitigation activities can be efficiently removed from the National Forests.

Electric utilities currently receive special use permits, which provide authorization from the Forest Service to fell dead, diseased, dying, and green hazard trees located in their respective service territory through permitted vegetation management operations. In order to remove the felled trees, current regulations require utilities to purchase the felled trees from the Forest Service through a timber sale contract or give the trees away to certain designated entities through a time consuming and inefficient process. 36 CFR 223 – the Sale and Disposal of National Forest System Timber – proscribes specific authorities by which the Forest Service can allow an entity to remove felled trees including: a timber sale; giving them to a Native American tribe; or reducing them to firewood at a campsite.

Utilities have suggested other options including the use of categorical exclusions or stewardship agreements, but the Forest Service has indicated that these options do not give them the legal authority needed to allow timber to be removed by utilities. They are effectively restricted by regulations based on current law.

The options provided under current law are not always practical or efficient for utilities. The result, in many cases, is that the utilities are forced to leave the felled trees onsite in the National Forests. This worsens an already vulnerable situation from a wildfire perspective, as debris and felled timber from previous years' vegetation mitigation operations remain in the forest landscape. In essence, the accumulation of this debris increases the intensity of wildfires. Removal of this fuel benefits the forest by helping to create fuel breaks and reduce wildfire intensity should a wildfire occur.

Representatives Carbajal and Chavez-DeRemer have recognized the problems with existing law and are working to provide a solution. The legislation we are discussing today, the Fire Safe

Electrical Corridors Act, would grant the USDA the authority to allow electric utilities with proper permits to remove timber that is felled within the vicinity of its power lines. This commonsense, bipartisan, legislation will reduce the amount of fuel in our National Forests and help us manage the wildfire risk on federal lands.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Southern California Edison's support of HR 6012, the Fire Safe Electrical Corridors Act.