



Testimony of

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for the

**House Natural Resources
Water, Wildfire and Fisheries Subcommittee**

hearing on

**Bureaucratic Delays and the Costs to Ratepayers and
Electric Power Systems**

1324 Longworth House Office Building

**February 24, 2026
10:15 AM**

Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries, thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to appear before you. My name is Ralph Armstrong and I am a senior assistant business manager of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 1245. I appreciate the opportunity to testify about wildfire prevention and mitigation and why these issues impact energy affordability.

Local 1245 is one of IBEW's largest local unions. We have nearly 30,000 members -- including 5,000 Vegetation Management workers that include Line Clearance Tree Trimmers and Vegetation Management Inspectors -- working for most of the private and public energy companies serving central and northern California and northern Nevada. Among the companies members of Local 1245 work for in both the private and public sector are Pacific Gas and Electric Company, Sacramento Municipal Utility District, and the Northern California Power Agency in California, and NV Energy in Northern Nevada, to name a few.

As a nearly 40-year IBEW member and trained journeyman lineman, I am grateful to be able to share my own expertise and the experience of IBEW members with you today. IBEW members work in dangerous conditions to keep power lines obstruction-free in the long-running effort to prevent wildfires from igniting, as linemen on the frontlines restoring power when it fails due to wildfires, and as members of communities where wildfires spread.

A little bit more about myself: I serve on numerous boards and committees focused on worker safety, standards and best practices. Currently, I am serving a second term on the State of California Wildfire Safety Advisory Board, a Senate-appointed position. The board makes recommendations on preventing utility-owned assets from creating wildfires. In addition, I have developed line safety

programs and worked in management as a safety lead for the Western Area Power Administration.

IBEW Local 1245 wants to see every tool available being used to mitigate and prevent wildfires. That is why we support the Fix our Forests Act, a bill that reduces the threat of catastrophic wildfires and costly electricity blackouts by coordinating grid hardening and vegetation management throughout all federal lands. Importantly, the legislation will increase the safety of our members and communities – and the safety and reliability of the electric grid on federal lands.

On any given day, an IBEW line clearance tree trimming crew could be tackling a job on a utility right-of-way on federal land. For those who may not understand what we do, our crews are literally clearing trees and vegetation located too close to a power line, risking contact that results in an outage or a fire. In our experience on the front lines, utilities need a streamlined and consistent process for hazardous vegetation removal. But our hands are tied by federal laws that require routine maintenance on federal lands while permitting and approval delays stall the work and slow down our ability to safely supply dependable electricity. Project completion delays can come from out of nowhere and range from concerns by private property owners to roadway issues flagged by municipalities. Run-of-the-mill local politics, weather-related time-of-year construction restrictions and a long list of state and federal regulations halt projects daily.

Procedural delays and lack of consistent requirements across federal lands not only jeopardize safety but also contribute to rising electricity costs. Wildfires destroy infrastructure, cause service interruptions, or require emergency repairs, all of which are expensive propositions. According to RMI, wildfire-related costs make up 16 percent of total customer electricity costs in California. Procedural delays in the permitting process also contribute to raising workforce costs. In an environment where we are forced to mobilize and demobilize crews because of red

tape and business uncertainty, recruitment costs go up and jobs can suffer because of temporary worker shortages.

Finally, an uncertain business environment can also diminish worker training and safety. I don't think it's hard to imagine the scale of disaster possible with the use of un- or undertrained technicians working near energized lines. In often-dangerous environment, mistakes can result in loss of life, loss of property, and loss of essential services to the community. But despite the risks to life and property, standards often vary by contractor or are not in place at all. That's why the IBEW champions minimum training standards. A good model and jumping off point is California's SB 247, which, among other things, established training requirements, worker qualifications, and prevailing wage requirements. Since it was implemented, this trade has seen far less turnover, worker casualties, and has turned a job into a family-sustaining career.

Delivering electric power can be hazardous work. IBEW members know the systems and the risks, better than anyone. When your job is having to expect the unexpected, having union backed training makes all the difference. Thanks to the IBEW, they are more prepared for anything they may encounter on the job.

Protecting the health and safety of the line workforce is a founding principle of the IBEW – and a priority that hasn't wavered in more than 130 years.

Allowing power providers to proactively remove hazardous trees before they become problems, not after they've caused a fire is good public policy. The recent, devastating fires in California and across the West should convince us that the time to act is now.

Once again, I thank the Subcommittee for its interest in this subject, and will be happy to answer any questions. Thank you.