



POWERGRAM

A monthly newsletter for OCEC Members

OCEC'S MITIGATION EFFORTS TO REDUCE WILDFIRE RISK

Wildfire risk is a major concern, particularly in the western U.S. In our mountainous, forested, and arid area, OCEC deals with this concern daily. Millions of dollars are spent each year on vegetation management and system maintenance to mitigate the risk of wildfire in our service territory. We implement a one-shot/non-reclose practice to reduce wildfire risk from powerlines, which can lead to longer outages and reduced reliability for members.

Recent lawsuits related to utility-involved wildfires are making liability insurance either unavailable or increasingly expensive. Some lawsuits are in the billions of dollars, drastically exceeding insurance policy limits, making bankruptcy due to wildfire litigation a legitimate cause of concern for all electric utilities, including cooperatives. Regardless of if the utility is owned by investors, a cooperative, or a municipality, the end consumer will pay the cost of any large claim or bankruptcy.

Dealing with these issues is going to require perseverance and a long-term commitment to mitigating risk. We will need to advocate for better management of our public lands, including permitting reform and fuel reduction. As property owners, we need to consider thinning vegetation to minimize impacts from wildfire. As OCEC members we'd also ask for your cooperation on our right-of-way maintenance and vegetation management program. Our employees and contractors often run into resistance from members when we are simply trying to maintain our rights-of-way to prevent power outages and fires. As a cooperative, we are very sensitive to responding to our members' concerns about tree removal. While we understand the need to address those concerns, every hour spent addressing them is an hour not spent doing the work that may prevent the next power outage or fire.

Losses from the recent South Fork & Salt Fires was catastrophic. Power lines were not the cause of these devastating wildfires but have been the source of ignition of other fires in recent years, both in New Mexico and across the nation. Preventing these catastrophic fires is one of OCEC's highest priorities.

OCEC spends around one million dollars every year on vegetation management and more than

triple that on system maintenance. Our Vegetation Management Coordinator leads our right-of-way maintenance and vegetation management efforts. As you might imagine, in our heavily forested land, preventing every tree, branch, or limb from coming in contact with almost 2,800 miles of power line in our service area is all but impossible, especially given 100+ foot tall trees, paired with easements that only allow us to maintain the right-of-way up to 15 feet from the centerline.

What we do in this arena has numerous impacts on our members. The expense of tree cutting, vegetation management, right-of-way maintenance, and line maintenance all increase expenses, which you pay in higher rates. Our one-shot program during certain weather situations often causes more frequent and longer outages, particularly in the Spring. As we are becoming more aggressive with these efforts, many members get angry or irritated that we must remove trees near the line.

We have no choice in these matters. Wildfire is the number one financial risk for electric utilities, including cooperatives, in large part because we are all being held to impossible standards. If a fire involves a powerline, the utility WILL be involved in litigation. It doesn't matter if every standard is followed, and through an act of God, a green tree crashes through a line on red flag warning day, the utility WILL be involved in a lawsuit. Our job is to inspect and maintain our rights-of-way according to industry standards so that we can prevent wildfire, and if our line is involved, prove that it was not caused by our negligence. Unfortunately, the outage or fire that was prevented from our efforts will never be known.

Our neighboring utility has filed a Public Safety Power Shutoff program with the New Mexico Public Regulations Commission, which is very similar to actions taken by large utilities in California and Colorado. Their plan will require that they preemptively shut off the power in certain areas during weather conditions when there is increased risk of wildfire. This could lead to multiple days of power outages, with restoration not happening until line crews have inspected all lines affected by the shutoff



SEPTEMBER CALENDAR PHOTO
submitted by Aristeo Chavez

**SEPTEMBER
2024**

CLOUDCROFT
575-682-2521

ALTO
575-336-4550

CARRIZOZO
575-648-2352

LOBBY HOURS
8 AM - 4 PM
MONDAY - FRIDAY

**TO REPORT AN
OUTAGE, CALL**
1-800-548-4660

**FOR BALANCE
INFORMATION OR TO
PAY YOUR BILL, CALL**
1-855-940-3957

WWW.OCEC-INC.COM

OCEC'S MITIGATION EFFORTS TO REDUCE WILDFIRE RISK (CONTINUED)

prior to reenergizing. If approved, this will affect the neighboring villages and may have implications for every other electric utility in the state, including OCEC.

OCEC currently has no intent to implement this type of program, as we see this as an unreasonable and unworkable solution given the rural nature of our service territory. With over 2,800 miles of line, much of which is in forested or grassy areas, a program such as this would likely have outages lasting days at a time, as these weather events occur on consecutive days, and it would take us days after the event is over to inspect our lines.

As this issue persists in much of the western United States, insurance coverage, for both homeowners and liability insurance for utilities will become increasingly expensive, if available at all. While rates are increasing, so far, we have been able to retain insurance coverage for wildfire liability with only modest increases.

Dealing with all these issues is going to require perseverance and a long-term commitment to mitigating risk. We will all need to advocate for better management of our public lands and should consider thinning our own properties. As OCEC members and owners we'd specifically ask for your cooperation on our right-of-way maintenance and vegetation management program. Our employees and contractors often run into resistance from members when we are simply trying to maintain our rights-of-way to prevent power outages and fires. Sometimes, it's more than resistance. On occasion, our employees and contractors have even been threatened with firearms over tree removal on our right-of-way. Even if it doesn't go to that extent, please remember, every hour our crews spend addressing a member's complaint is an hour not spent finding and removing the next potential wildfire threat. Please try to understand the monumental task and enormous responsibility we have. Don't give our vegetation management and tree cutting crews a hard time. Everything they do is simply to protect our communities and members from the next outage, fire, or lawsuit. Each person they deal with can either assist or be a hindrance to that effort. Please help us with these efforts and encourage your friends and neighbors to do the same.

Unauthorized Wood Collection



When vegetation management crews clear rights-of-way, logs and debris are left on the property where they were cut. This wood belongs to the property owner, and you must get their permission to remove it. OCEC does not have the authority to allow others to take it.

Please respect your neighbors and ensure you have proper authorization before taking any wood from land you do not own.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY TIP

Now is the time to schedule annual maintenance for your home's heating system. During fall months, HVAC technicians are typically busy, making this an excellent time for maintenance and any necessary repairs before the winter months. A qualified technician can clean filters, check for leaks and ensure all system components are working efficiently to keep your home cozy and warm when the temperatures begin to drop.

Source: [energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov)

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Crews working to trim trees and vegetation in rights-of-way are currently in the following areas and are expected to remain there for the next few weeks.

- o Pine Hill Loop & Enchanted Forest areas - Alto
- o El Valle Loop area - San Patricio
- o Highway 130, Cox Canyon, Sixteen Springs, and Bell Canyon areas - Cloudcroft

OCEC reminds members that you may see vehicles, ATVs, and crew members from Rogers Tree Service cutting trees near existing power lines. Vehicles will be marked with their company name and an OCEC contractor placard.

PVT also has contractors working on broadband expansion to their lines in the following areas.

- o El Valle Loop area - San Patricio
- o James Canyon, Cox Canyon, and Sixteen Springs, areas - Cloudcroft

TO MAKE A PAYMENT BY PHONE OR OBTAIN YOUR BALANCE, PLEASE CALL

1-855-940-3957

MEMBER APPRECIATION PICNIC

Come join us for a fabulous picnic featuring, hamburgers, hot dogs, giveaways, and an opportunity to visit with trustees and employees!

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

11 AM - 2 PM



OCEC Headquarters - 404 Burro Avenue - Cloudcroft, NM