

**BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION  
OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

*Order Instituting Rulemaking to Implement  
Electricity Utility Wildfire Mitigation  
Plans Pursuant to Senate Bill 901 (2018)*

Rulemaking 18-10-007  
(Filed October 25, 2018)

**RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES OF CALIFORNIA COMMENTS  
ON PROPOSED GUIDANCE DECISION OF ALJs THOMAS AND ALLEN  
FOR 2019 WILDFIRE MITIGATION PLANS SUBMITTED PURSUANT  
TO SENATE BILL 901**

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Dated: May 15, 2013

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In accordance with Rule 6.2 of the California Public Utilities Commission (“Commission”) Rules of Practice and Procedure (“Rules”), the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) respectfully submits these comments to the Order Instituting Rulemaking 18-10-007 (“Rulemaking”).

**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

On behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), I am pleased to comment on *Order Instituting Rulemaking to Implement Electricity Utility Wildfire Mitigation Plans Pursuant to Senate Bill 901 (2018)* related to the Proposed Guidance Decision. RCRC received party status via written ruling on March 21, 2019. RCRC is an association of thirty-six rural California counties, and its Board of Directors is comprised of elected supervisors from those member counties.

RCRC member counties contain much of California's forested lands, including more than 70 percent of the State's national forest lands. Rural communities are at the epicenter of the "new normal," having historically borne the lion's share of destruction caused by high severity wildfires. Wildfire risk is becoming a wider public safety concern as the wildland urban interface spreads over larger areas of the State due to climate change and the lingering impacts of the recent five-year drought.

RCRC has a broad interest in the implementation of Senate Bill 901 and minimizing the risks of catastrophic wildfire. Federal, state, and local partners have been actively engaged to undertake coordination efforts across jurisdictional lines to protect life and property from preventable wildfire events. Wildfire Mitigation Plans (WMPs) are an essential component to identifying risk drivers and subsequent actions for Investor Owned Utilities (IOUs) to take with local entities and first responders to increase public safety and reduce wildfire ignitions. While de-energization of electrical lines is a valuable tool to ensure public safety during extreme weather conditions to help prevent future fires or at least prevent the rapid spread of fires, they must be done more thoughtfully and used as a last resort.

RCRC has played an active role in forest management issues, including participating on the Tree Mortality Task Force since 2015, which transformed into the Forest Management Task Force created by Executive Order (B-52-18) to restore forests and renew aggressive forest management practices. RCRC was also a member of the Forest Climate Action Team and participated in the development of the state's Forest Carbon Plan, which is now being used as one of the main guides for forest management and restoration in California's quest to sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prevent future wildfires on a large landscape scale. Local governments and residents have undergone great financial hardships not only with recovery efforts after the last several years of catastrophic wildfire events, but with establishing higher standards for preventative efforts of home hardening and defensible space, as well difficulties with maintaining affordable and accessible insurance coverage. It is incumbent upon IOUs through WMPs to be a prudent manager of their vast territory to reduce preventable wildfire ignitions in high fire severity zones.

RCRC offers comments relevant to our member counties for the respective categories outlined in the Guidance Decision on 2019 Wildfire Mitigation Plans submitted pursuant to Senate Bill 901.

## **INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY**

RCRC appreciates the acknowledgement of the Commission that IOUs' metrics tend to focus on inputs rather than results and outputs.<sup>1</sup> We further support future WMPs to reemphasize the importance of outcomes and adopt clear metrics to achieve desired outcomes. Wildfire Mitigation Plans are not an exercise in reducing corporate liability and maximizing ratepayer cost recovery, it is a concerted effort to lower the risk of catastrophic wildfires from occurring and spreading.

## **MEANING OF COMMISSION APPROVAL OF WMP UNDER SB 901**

We further agree that cost recovery should be addressed in a General Rate Case (GRC) proceeding, and that "substantial compliance" does not ensure an IOU would receive cost recovery. Wildfire Mitigation Plans are undoubtedly costly, but SB 901 does not guarantee activities completed by IOUs will be automatically funded by ratepayers, particularly since many of the measures being discussed should have been implemented long before California's current fire conditions became normalized.

## **METRICS, MONITORING AND REPORTING REQUIRED OF ALL WMP FILERS**

It is an important duty of the CPUC to define metrics that can be consistently compared against all other IOU WMPs. To that end, we appreciate the development of a common template be used for metrics in the future. It is essential that the public and stakeholders be able to make apples-to-apples comparisons of WMPs across all IOUs. We would encourage the CPUC to further consult with CAL FIRE during the development of this process.

## **EVALUATION OF CURRENT INSPECTION PLANS**

A GRC proceeding should also ensure there is a distinction between routine costs of an IOU and new inspection obligations from WMP activities before awarding any additional ratepayer funds. An IOU should have to clearly distinguish the differences between complying with current General Orders, and how the WMP is a value-added action that cannot be achieved through routine maintenance and inspections. Rural residents tend to have higher energy bills, due in part to pumped water burdens; they cannot write a blank check for utilities to maintain their

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<sup>1</sup> Page 3.

service area and prevent harm. It is only through a GRC proceeding that costs be can be thoroughly vetted to minimize detrimental impacts on ratepayers, many of which are elderly and on fixed incomes in rural areas.

## **INTEGRATION OF GRC PROCESS WITH WMP REVIEW**

We appreciate the refinement for stakeholders to better understand how a mitigation measure may or may not be cost-effective. The Multi-Attribute Value Function (MAVF) is an appropriate tool to measure value against all potential consequences of a risk and we support its inclusion in future WMPs.

## **OFF RAMPS**

Any process that would allow an IOU to potentially discontinue a mitigation measure must be weighed with a replacement action in order to comply with their WMP and the intent of Senate Bill 901. We acknowledge the need to terminate ineffective mitigation measures as a sensible protection of limited ratepayer dollars. However, we caution against allowing IOUs to modify, reduce or potentially end an action without approval or oversight of the CPUC. We further believe that any discontinuation of a mitigation measure should also be rebated to ratepayers.

We request the CPUC clarify if these Tier 3 Advice Letters, “Reports on Possible Off Ramps,” will occur regularly after a WMP is approved, or only in intervals as specified after the effective date of the 2019 decision. Further, we request clarification on the process of how an IOU may go about executing an off ramp. For instance, are these Advice Letters purely informational? Or is there a separate decision-making process to take action on a modified mitigation measure after a WMP is initially approved? RCRC requests that IOUs notify local government entities of any modification to a WMP post CPUC approval to give adequate lead-time to help communities prepare for any unintended consequences.

## **FUTURE WMPs**

Utilities should continuously consult with local governments for feedback on WMPs. We appreciate the directive the CPUC has given to IOUs to confer a meeting with parties and stakeholders prior to next year’s WMP. This process should be repeated in future years as well. Effective communication and coordination with local government entities ensures WMP

components move forward smoothly and are cost-effective for ratepayers, with limited impacts on taxpayers. The health and safety of our state and the environment is dependent upon reducing catastrophic wildfires in high-threat, fire-prone areas and local governments are an important partner at every stage of an emergency, including preventative efforts.

## **CONSULTATION WITH CAL FIRE HAS OCCURRED**

Pursuant to Senate Bill 901, CAL FIRE plays a valuable role consulting in the WMP process. It would be helpful if, in the future, the CPUC could enumerate or better articulate how it has conferred with CAL FIRE on various aspects of the WMP to ensure these plans will result in fewer catastrophic wildfires. The CPUC would be better served by creating a more formal role or input framework that would reflect CAL FIRE feedback in these proposed decisions.

## **CONCLUSION**

RCRC's participation in this proceeding will not prejudice any party and will not delay the schedule or broaden the scope of the issues in the proceeding. For the reasons stated above, Rural County Representatives of California respectfully requests that the CPUC grant this Motion for Party Status filing and accept RCRC's comments for filing.

Dated: May 15, 2019

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ [Your name]

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