

PG&E tree removal and vegetation management issues 11/2/18 final

Better powerline safety can and should be achieved to protect our environment and homes. However, damage and fires from trees is just one small part of the story regarding wildfires caused by powerlines. PG&E equipment failure from high winds has been a cause of many fires, and existing lines do not usually have coated wire or new technology which could shut off power in seconds before sparks from wires start fire. Line segments can also be put underground.

What is PG&E's newest program for vegetation management/removal? And what is the legal requirement?

There is still some confusion and doubt as to whether PG&E's 12 foot clearance on either side of the line tree removal program is a requirement. Here is what a PG&E manager recently stated in an email- *the underlining in the quote has been made to the original for emphasis.*

"The CPUC adopted new vegetation and fire safety standards effective December 2017 that require power companies to maintain greater vegetation clearances to increase the safety of overhead power lines in high fire-threat areas. The standards require a clearance of 4 feet around power lines in high fire-threat areas with recommended minimum clearances of 12 feet or more at time of trim to ensure compliance year-round. (See General Order 95, Rule 35 and Appendix E.)"

The 12 ft clearance will result in very large amounts of tree removal in our area including many trees more than a century old. When these trees are removed they cannot be put back. PG&E installed their equipment next to many of these old trees when they put the lines in. It appears that the 12 foot guideline was designed in part to minimize routine maintenance costs by PG&E.

How many trees will be removed in the Arnold area? PG&E has provided no estimate for public review of the size of trees or number of trees they plan to cut in the Arnold area, or statewide.

What alternatives does PG&E have other than complete tree removal?

- Trimming trees more frequently versus removing whole trees. Placing segments of line underground.
- Installing better coated wire. Installing equipment that shuts off the power before a broken line can start a fire.

Was an environmental review conducted? No. And no analysis of alternatives to improve fire safety were evaluated.

Suggestions for homeowners (note – depending on your property location, the powerline locations, and your trees and other vegetation in the layout of your home etc., your property may be affected very little, or the impact could be extreme and negativ. Throughout the community we live in, the impacts will be dramatic).

- **Learn more about this program and your rights, and document conditions before and after.**
- Locate your title search and your deed for your house and find the PG&E right of way away. If you cannot find it you can go to the county planning department recorder's office. You must go in person to search their records.
- **Understand the impacts on your property value.** Contact a realtor. Ask them what you must do as a seller to divulge that trees that exist now might not exist when a buyer would take possession. Also, ask the realtor to tell you how much your property value would change if all of the trees in your or your neighbors' 12 feet on either side of the line were removed. Call the county tax collector's office/assessor's office to determine if you will lose value due to loss of your trees, privacy, more noise from roads or highways, negative views of neighbor's old cars etc. Determine if your house will lose privacy or shade and become hotter and drier. Will you need air conditioning in the future due to lack of shade?

- Look at your trees prior to PG&E arriving and understand the potential negative impacts of removal of various trees, but also review the potential hazard to the powerlines where removal or extreme trimming is warranted for fire safety. See section below for more ideas of what to look for.
- Make a list of any special plant species or nesting birds and point them out to PG&E. If there are active nests demand a biologist review and mark the tree as no cut. Especially note any endangered or special species such as California spotted owl and ensure that PG&E documents these. Ask them for evidence that they have done so. If you have a tree that serves as a rookery for certain bird species every year, please try to protect that tree
- **Join the Facebook page -Citizens for Responsible PG&E Fire Prevention**
<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=citizens%20for%20responsible%20pg%26e%20fire%20prevention>
- **Photograph and video your property before and after tree loss.** Let others know what is happening to your property. Post photos and videos on social media.
- You have the right to talk to a PG&E manager about any trees that are going to be removed or other issues if a tree is marked and you do not want it removed. Other options, such as trimming or topping the tree or asking that PG&E install other shutoff safety devices for the section of the line and install coated wire. Ask for a manager or supervisor to review the situation. Insist that these concerns be documented on the record that is associated with your address. If PG&E's answers aren't clear, call **1-877-295-4949**.
- Insist that PGE provide a release form to be signed by you for any tree to be removed.

Potential Negative impacts from the 12-foot tree removal program that homeowners should be aware of and consider when working with PG&E:

- **Decreased property values, removal of valuable property – your trees, and decreased attractiveness of our community.** Power lines will be exposed and visible. The loss of trees will decrease the character of our community that residents and tourists cherish.
- **Loss of remaining large and century-old trees** Large old trees are important to the look and feel of our community and property values, as well as for wildlife habitat and carbon storage. Trees can often be trimmed back to increase power line safety, versus fully removing trees from ground-to-sky in the 12-foot area on either side of the lines. Oaks and other deciduous trees can handle pruning extremely well. But they need to be trimmed by someone with some training.
- **Loss of expensive landscaping, as well as dogwoods and other flowering and seed-producing plants** If PG&E's 12-foot vegetation removal program is adhered to, many properties in our area will lose their ornamental vegetation, dogwoods, and fruit trees under PG&E's new guidelines. But in fact, most of them will not grow up to interfere with the powerlines. Most of our area yards already have defensible space maintained with low fuel loads , so the fire risk is rather low.
- **Erosion from hillside slides, and hillside slumps and failures** -Removal of vegetation and tree canopy cover on slopes can cause extreme erosion which will run off into streams, affecting water quality. It can also cause steep hillsides to slump and fail especially in monsoonal rains and rain on snow events. Extreme weather events will worsen these effects. If you have concerns about potential structural, and other impacts, like hills slumping, please call the county planning department for advice. Also, ask PG&E to have a geologist or soils engineer look at the area, and that you want to be present when they come. With more extreme weather events possible you might want to hire your own consultant to evaluate risk to your property from tree removal.
- **Road damage from heavy equipment** PG&E's heavy chippers and log trucks can damage driveways and private roads. Claims can be filed with PG&E for such damage, but the homeowner will have to do a lot of work to get a claim approved. County roads can also be damaged, but I believe that PG&E is not required to reimburse the county. Be Sure You Photograph Your Road Condition prior to PG&E heavy equipment arrival.

- **Increased heat and decreased humidity-** Houses that have their shade trees removed will experience higher temperatures in the hot summers. When trees are removed the area becomes hotter and drier, which increases fire danger.
- **Damage to underground lines when heavy trees fall – know where your septic, propane water lines are.**
- **Increased wind due to tree removal can topple remaining trees-** If large trees are removed that previously buffered winds, remaining trees have less resistance to strong winds. Additionally, tree roots intertwine with other tree roots and give all of the trees more stability in storms.
- **Dry grass will replace green vegetation when trees are removed** --Dry grass can be an extreme fire hazard, catching on fire and spreading fire more quickly than green vegetation.
- **Maintenance of the area under power lines and use of herbicides.** Understand how the area cleared under power lines will be maintained. **PG&E uses a variety of herbicides** around poles and may use them on powerline right of ways unless property owners tell them you do not want herbicides used. Glyphosate is one of the chemicals used and it is a carcinogen. All herbicides can have negative impacts on frogs and other wildlife. When herbicides are sprayed the drift can kill other plants nearby the target.
- **Seasonal stream and stream area tree and vegetation removal may increase flash flooding-** The amount of water volume reaching streams during storms is increased when there is no vegetation to absorb and intercept stormwater.
- **Birds, squirrels, and other wildlife will lose their homes, nests, and food supplies.** If you know of active nests or species of special concern, please let PG&E know and insist on follow-up and surveys before any trees are cut. Calaveras already has experienced a huge loss in habitat due to the widespread clearcutting, as well as drought and beetle mortality of trees in many areas.
- **Archeological impacts-** if there are known archaeological sites please inform PG&E
- **Noise** - without trees your property may hear a lot more noise from your neighbors as well as nearby roads and highways – that can also impact resale and property value

additional things to be aware of when dealing with PG&E.

- **PG&E has mismarked trees for removal on several properties where the very experienced and educated homeowners caught their errors.** When supervisors were called in, PG&E admitted the trees were marked in error. Some of PG&E's contractor employees who are marking trees are inexperienced. Many are from out-of-state and are unfamiliar with growth patterns of our tree species. PG&E's "rules" have been in flux since they started in our area. They are implementing this at breakneck speed and many of their contract employees etc. are relatively inexperienced. Ask all the PG&E reps that you deal with what their qualifications are, if they are arborists or other specialists where they got their education, and how long they have been doing this.
- **In many cases the entire tree does not need to be cut down when only some branches intrude into the 12' border.** If branches can be trimmed to a sufficient set-back distance, the tree does not have to be cut.
- If a marked tree is located far outside the 12 ft area, and not obviously at risk of falling towards the powerlines, the property owner can dispute having the tree cut down. If the tree crews still believe it is a hazard, ask for PG&E to arrange for a project manager to come to the property to help resolve the issue.
- Request that that PG&E not mark or cut certain trees that have value to you . Many trees can be trimmed versus cut especially ones such as fruit trees, dogwoods, and other landscaping. Most of these trees are probably already in a defensible space area anyway.

To find out more, or how to contact PG&E about marking on your property

Call: 1-877-295-4949 or E-mail PG&E at: wildfiresafety@pge.com