



Jim Matheson
Chief Executive Officer

June 19, 2017

The Honorable Rob Bishop
Chairman, House Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Bishop:

I write in support of H.R. 1873, the Electricity Reliability and Forest Protection Act, introduced by Representatives Doug LaMalfa and Kurt Schrader. We urge the House of Representatives to pass this important legislation. This common-sense legislation provides opportunities for electric cooperatives to better enhance safety and ensure the delivery of affordable, reliable electricity to their members.

As you know, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association is the national service organization that represents the nation's more than 900 private, not-for-profit, consumer-owned electric cooperatives, which provide service to 42 million people in 47 states. Rural electric cooperatives across the country are often located in areas on or near public lands. Therefore, moving electricity from generation facilities to customers frequently requires transmission and distribution lines to cross land that is federally managed. Access to these lines is essential to perform routine maintenance, upgrades, and equipment replacement. Further, vegetation management is of utmost importance to meet state and federal safety requirements and to ensure electric reliability for our member-owners.

The Electricity Reliability and Forest Protection Act would give electric utilities more consistent procedures and a streamlined process in order to better manage utility rights of way. The bill allows sensible procedures that would cut through federal bureaucratic red tape and reduce delays that currently impede our ability to adequately manage dangerous vegetative overgrowth in existing utility rights of way. Such delays not only add to the costs our electric consumers pay for their electricity, but present a major threat to human safety, wildlife habitat, and the reliable delivery of electricity.

In short, H.R. 1873 would be a useful tool for allowing prompt, critical access to utility rights of way and responding to emergency conditions to help prevent wildfire, power outages, and threats to the electric grid. Again, we urge all Members of Congress to support this bill when it is considered by the House.

Sincerely,

Jim Matheson
Chief Executive Officer
National Rural Electric Cooperative Association

115TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 1873

To amend the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 to enhance the reliability of the electricity grid and reduce the threat of wildfires to and from electric transmission and distribution facilities on Federal lands by facilitating vegetation management on such lands.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APRIL 4, 2017

Mr. LAMALFA (for himself, Mr. SCHRADER, Ms. CHENEY, Mr. COSTA, Mr. WESTERMAN, and Mr. O'HALLERAN) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Natural Resources, and in addition to the Committee on Agriculture, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned

A BILL

To amend the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 to enhance the reliability of the electricity grid and reduce the threat of wildfires to and from electric transmission and distribution facilities on Federal lands by facilitating vegetation management on such lands.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the "Electricity Reliability
5 and Forest Protection Act".

1 **SEC. 2. VEGETATION MANAGEMENT, FACILITY INSPECTION,**
2 **AND OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE ON**
3 **FEDERAL LANDS CONTAINING ELECTRIC**
4 **TRANSMISSION AND DISTRIBUTION FACILI-**
5 **TIES.**

6 (a) IN GENERAL.—Title V of the Federal Land Pol-
7 icy and Management Act of 1976 (43 U.S.C. 1761 et seq.)
8 is amended by adding at the end the following new section:

9 **“SEC. 512. VEGETATION MANAGEMENT, FACILITY INSPEC-**
10 **TION, AND OPERATION, AND MAINTENANCE**
11 **RELATING TO ELECTRIC TRANSMISSION AND**
12 **DISTRIBUTION FACILITY RIGHTS-OF-WAY.**

13 “(a) GENERAL DIRECTION.—In order to enhance the
14 reliability of the electricity grid and reduce the threat of
15 wildfires to and from electric transmission and distribu-
16 tion rights-of-way and related facilities and adjacent prop-
17 erty, the Secretary, with respect to public lands and other
18 lands under the jurisdiction of the Secretary, and the Sec-
19 retary of Agriculture, with respect to National Forest Sys-
20 tem lands, shall provide direction to ensure that all exist-
21 ing and future rights-of-way, however established (includ-
22 ing by grant, special use authorization, and easement), for
23 electrical transmission and distribution facilities on such
24 lands include provisions for utility vegetation manage-
25 ment, facility inspection, and operation and maintenance
26 activities that, while consistent with applicable law—

1 “(1) are developed in consultation with the
2 holder of the right-of-way;

3 “(2) enable the owner or operator of a facility
4 to operate and maintain the facility in good working
5 order and to comply with Federal, State and local
6 electric system reliability and fire safety require-
7 ments, including reliability standards established by
8 the North American Electric Reliability Corporation
9 and plans to meet such reliability standards;

10 “(3) minimize the need for case-by-case or an-
11 nual approvals for—

12 “(A) routine vegetation management, facil-
13 ity inspection, and operation and maintenance
14 activities within existing electrical transmission
15 and distribution rights-of-way; and

16 “(B) utility vegetation management activi-
17 ties that are necessary to control hazard trees
18 within or adjacent to electrical transmission and
19 distribution rights-of-way; and

20 “(4) when review is required, provide for expe-
21 dited review and approval of utility vegetation man-
22 agement, facility inspection, and operation and
23 maintenance activities, especially activities requiring
24 prompt action to avoid an adverse impact on human
25 safety or electric reliability to avoid fire hazards.

1 “(b) VEGETATION MANAGEMENT, FACILITY INSPEC-
2 TION, AND OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE PLANS.—

3 “(1) DEVELOPMENT AND SUBMISSION.—Con-
4 sistent with subsection (a), the Secretary and the
5 Secretary of Agriculture shall provide owners and
6 operators of electric transmission and distribution
7 facilities located on lands described in such sub-
8 section with the option to develop and submit a
9 vegetation management, facility inspection, and op-
10 eration and maintenance plan, that at each owner or
11 operator’s transmission discretion may cover some or
12 all of the owner or operator’s transmission and dis-
13 tribution rights-of-way on Federal lands, for ap-
14 proval to the Secretary with jurisdiction over the
15 lands. A plan under this paragraph shall enable the
16 owner or operator of a facility, at a minimum, to
17 comply with applicable Federal, State, and local elec-
18 tric system reliability and fire safety requirements,
19 as provided in subsection (a)(2). The Secretaries
20 shall not have the authority to modify those require-
21 ments.

22 “(2) REVIEW AND APPROVAL PROCESS.—The
23 Secretary and the Secretary of Agriculture shall
24 jointly develop a consolidated and coordinated proc-
25 ess for review and approval of—

1 “(A) vegetation management, facility in-
2 spection, and operation and maintenance plans
3 submitted under paragraph (1) that—

4 “(i) assures prompt review and ap-
5 proval not to exceed 90 days;

6 “(ii) includes timelines and bench-
7 marks for agency comments to submitted
8 plans and final approval of such plans;

9 “(iii) is consistent with applicable law;
10 and

11 “(iv) minimizes the costs of the proc-
12 ess to the reviewing agency and the entity
13 submitting the plans; and

14 “(B) amendments to the plans in a prompt
15 manner if changed conditions necessitate a
16 modification to a plan.

17 “(3) NOTIFICATION.—The review and approval
18 process under paragraph (2) shall—

19 “(A) include notification by the agency of
20 any changed conditions that warrant a modi-
21 fication to a plan;

22 “(B) provide an opportunity for the owner
23 or operator to submit a proposed plan amend-
24 ment to address directly the changed condition;
25 and

1 “(C) allow the owner or operator to con-
2 tinue to implement those elements of the ap-
3 proved plan that do not directly and adversely
4 affect the condition precipitating the need for
5 modification.

6 “(4) CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION PROCESS.—The
7 Secretary and the Secretary of Agriculture shall
8 apply his or her categorical exclusion process under
9 the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42
10 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.) to plans developed under this
11 subsection on existing transmission and distribution
12 rights-of-way under this subsection.

13 “(5) IMPLEMENTATION.—A plan approved
14 under this subsection shall become part of the au-
15 thorization governing the covered right-of-way and
16 hazard trees adjacent to the right-of-way. If a vege-
17 tation management plan is proposed for an existing
18 transmission and distribution facility concurrent
19 with the siting of a new transmission or distribution
20 facility, necessary reviews shall be completed as part
21 of the siting process or sooner. Once the plan is ap-
22 proved, the owner or operator shall provide the agen-
23 cy with only a notification of activities anticipated to
24 be undertaken in the coming year, a description of

1 those activities, and certification that the activities
2 are in accordance with the plan.

3 “(6) DEFINITIONS.—In this subsection:

4 “(A) VEGETATION MANAGEMENT, FACIL-
5 ITY INSPECTION, AND OPERATION AND MAINTEN-
6 NANCE PLAN.—The term ‘vegetation manage-
7 ment, facility inspection, and operation and
8 maintenance plan’ means a plan that—

9 “(i) is prepared by the owner or oper-
10 ator of one or more electrical transmission
11 or distribution facilities to cover one or
12 more electric transmission and distribution
13 rights-of-way; and

14 “(ii) provides for the long-term, cost-
15 effective, efficient and timely management
16 of facilities and vegetation within the width
17 of the right-of-way and adjacent Federal
18 lands to enhance electricity reliability, pro-
19 mote public safety, and avoid fire hazards.

20 “(B) OWNER OR OPERATOR.—The terms
21 ‘owner’ and ‘operator’ include contractors or
22 other agents engaged by the owner or operator
23 of a facility.

24 “(C) HAZARD TREE.—The term ‘hazard
25 tree’ means any tree inside the right-of-way or

1 located outside the right-of-way that has been
2 found by either the owner or operator of a
3 transmission or distribution facility, or the Sec-
4 retary or the Secretary of Agriculture, to be
5 likely to fail and cause a high risk of injury,
6 damage, or disruption within 10 feet or less of
7 an electric power line or related structure if it
8 fell.

9 “(c) RESPONSE TO EMERGENCY CONDITIONS.—If
10 vegetation on Federal lands within, or hazard trees on
11 Federal lands adjacent to, an electrical transmission or
12 distribution right-of-way granted by the Secretary or the
13 Secretary of Agriculture has contacted or is in imminent
14 danger of contacting one or more electric transmission or
15 distribution lines, the owner or operator of the trans-
16 mission or distribution lines—

17 “(1) may prune or remove the vegetation to
18 avoid the disruption of electric service and risk of
19 fire; and

20 “(2) shall notify the appropriate local agent of
21 the relevant Secretary not later than 24 hours after
22 such removal.

23 “(d) COMPLIANCE WITH APPLICABLE RELIABILITY
24 AND SAFETY STANDARDS.—If vegetation on Federal
25 lands within or adjacent to an electrical transmission or

1 distribution right-of-way under the jurisdiction of each
2 Secretary does not meet clearance requirements under
3 standards established by the North American Electric Re-
4 liability Corporation, or by State and local authorities, and
5 the Secretary having jurisdiction over the lands has failed
6 to act to allow a transmission or distribution facility owner
7 or operator to conduct vegetation management activities
8 within 3 business days after receiving a request to allow
9 such activities, the owner or operator may, after notifying
10 the Secretary, conduct such vegetation management ac-
11 tivities to meet those clearance requirements.

12 “(e) REPORTING REQUIREMENT.—The Secretary or
13 Secretary of Agriculture shall report requests and actions
14 made under subsections (c) and (d) annually on each Sec-
15 retary’s website.

16 “(f) LIABILITY.—An owner or operator of a trans-
17 mission or distribution facility shall not be held liable for
18 wildfire damage, loss or injury, including the cost of fire
19 suppression, if—

20 “(1) the Secretary or the Secretary of Agri-
21 culture fails to allow the owner or operator to oper-
22 ate consistently with an approved vegetation man-
23 agement, facility inspection, and operation and
24 maintenance plan on Federal lands under the rel-
25 evant Secretary’s jurisdiction within or adjacent to

1 a right-of-way to comply with Federal, State or local
2 electric system reliability and fire safety standards,
3 including standards established by the North Amer-
4 ican Electric Reliability Corporation; or

5 “(2) the Secretary or the Secretary of Agri-
6 culture fails to allow the owner or operator of the
7 transmission or distribution facility to perform ap-
8 propriate vegetation management activities in re-
9 sponse to an identified hazard tree as defined under
10 subsection (b)(6), or a tree in imminent danger of
11 contacting the owner’s or operator’s transmission or
12 distribution facility.

13 “(g) TRAINING AND GUIDANCE.—In consultation
14 with the electric utility industry, the Secretary and the
15 Secretary of Agriculture are encouraged to develop a pro-
16 gram to train personnel of the Department of the Interior
17 and the Forest Service involved in vegetation management
18 decisions relating to transmission and distribution facili-
19 ties to ensure that such personnel—

20 “(1) understand electric system reliability and
21 fire safety requirements, including reliability stand-
22 ards established by the North American Electric Re-
23 liability Corporation;

24 “(2) assist owners and operators of trans-
25 mission and distribution facilities to comply with ap-

1 applicable electric reliability and fire safety require-
2 ments; and

3 “(3) encourage and assist willing owners and
4 operators of transmission and distribution facilities
5 to incorporate on a voluntary basis vegetation man-
6 agement practices to enhance habitats and forage
7 for pollinators and for other wildlife so long as the
8 practices are compatible with the integrated vegeta-
9 tion management practices necessary for reliability
10 and safety.

11 “(h) IMPLEMENTATION.—The Secretary of the Inte-
12 rior and the Secretary of Agriculture shall—

13 “(1) not later than one year after the date of
14 the enactment of this section, prescribe regulations,
15 or amend existing regulations, to implement this sec-
16 tion; and

17 “(2) not later than two years after the date of
18 the enactment of this section, finalize regulations, or
19 amend existing regulations, to implement this sec-
20 tion.

21 “(i) EXISTING VEGETATION MANAGEMENT, FACIL-
22 ITY INSPECTION AND OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE
23 PLANS.—Nothing in this section requires an owner or op-
24 erator to develop and submit a vegetation management,
25 facility inspection, and operation and maintenance plan if

1 one has already been approved by the Secretary or Sec-
2 retary of Agriculture before the date of the enactment of
3 this section.”.

4 (b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections
5 for the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976
6 (43 U.S.C. 1761 et seq.), is amended by inserting after
7 the item relating to section 511 the following new item:

“Sec. 512. Vegetation management, facility inspection, and operation, and
maintenance relating to electric transmission and distribution
facility rights-of-way.”.

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