

U.S. NEWS

# Utilities Face Scrutiny Over Fires

## California to Probe Safety Practices In Wake of Blazes

BY REBECCA SMITH

In an effort to deflect potential fines and lawsuits, two California utilities blamed by investigators for as many as eight of last year's deadly wildfires must now respond to questions about whether they met safety standards.

Earlier this week, the California Public Utilities Commission's staff issued investigative reports indicating that one of the utilities—San Diego Gas & Electric Co.—bears some responsibility for three wildfires in October 2007. Those fires—the Guejito, Witch and Rice fires—were believed triggered by high-voltage power lines. They and other fires that month forced the evacuation of as many as half a million people.

The eight fires linked to the San Diego utility and Southern California Edison caused two deaths, dozens of injuries, the loss of more than 1,500 homes and damage across 270,000 scorched acres in four counties.

The commission staff asked for permission to begin a formal probe into the three fires linked to San Diego Gas & Electric, a unit of Sempra Energy. The investigative staff is completing its analysis of five other fires linked to equipment owned by Southern California Edison and expects to have its work completed within a month. Those



fires resulted in the destruction of about 200 homes.

If it requests a formal probe, it is possible the commission could order the two utility cases consolidated and take a state-wide look at fire risks posed by utility power lines. A formal probe would be a public, judicial-style process that could take up to a year to conclude.

Depending on the outcome of the investigations, the utilities could be fined \$500 to \$20,000 per violation, per day, and billed for fire-suppression costs amounting to millions of dollars. They also face exposure to civil lawsuits by victims, whose fire losses were estimated at more than \$1 billion.

Richard Clark, director of the commission's Consumer Protection and Safety Division, said October 2007 was an extraordinary month and "we want to find out why the fires

happened and what we can do to prevent them in the future."

The two utilities are taking different approaches to the scrutiny. San Diego Gas & Electric is strongly contesting responsibility for the fires and said "we believe we...maintain our system in compliance with state regulations." Southern California Edison accepts responsibility but says it wasn't negligent.

According to one investigation, a water-tanker pilot fighting fires in San Diego County on October 21, 2007, reported seeing "bluish arcing" coming from the 69,000-volt power lines owned by San Diego Gas & Electric. The lines had tripped out of service several times that day, indicating they may have been slapping together. The state fire investigator said he believes sparks from the lines hit tinder-dry grass, begin-

ning the Witch blaze, one of the worst in California history.

In a statement Tuesday, the San Diego utility said the commission staff's report was "full of speculation and faulty conclusions."

Southern California Edison spokesman Steve Conroy said his utility accepts responsibility for five fires, but he said it didn't reflect slipshod practices on the utility's part. He blamed high winds and dry conditions that stressed utility equipment. For example, the Malibu fire that destroyed more than a dozen homes started after a wooden power pole snapped in high winds. In other cases, "extremely high wind conditions caused lines to slap together," and the resulting arcing of electric current produced sparks that ignited flammable material nearby, Mr. Conroy said.

In its probe, the commission staff doubtless will look at the age of equipment and inspection records, as well as whether lines slapped together because they didn't have proper spacers. They also will look at the proximity of flammable materials. Under the state utility code, companies are required to maintain equipment so that it is unlikely it could come into contact with anything that might ignite.

Civil lawyers are keenly interested in the state probes, "but the cases we're bringing will have to stand on their own," said Vince Bartolotta, a personal-injury lawyer in San Diego County who represents fire victims. Several cases have been filed in state Superior Court in San Diego County, and more are expected.