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ISO Urges Fire-Safe Independence Day

July Fourth Celebrations Can Spark Wildfires That Impact Transmission Grid

(Folsom, CA) Between fireworks, campfires and barbeques, the Fourth of July holiday is especially prone to wildfires that can destroy lives and property, and impact high-voltage transmission lines. Wildfires can disable sections of the grid leading to the potential for power outages. That is why the California Independent System Operator (California ISO) is urging all Californians to be especially careful with any use of fire this Fourth of July holiday.

“It doesn’t take much for a wildfire to impact the power grid,” said Jim Detmers, Interim Chief Operations Officer at the ISO “A big fire puts a lot of smoke and particulate matter into the air. That can foul the insulators on high-voltage lines causing short circuits that can take the lines out of service. In other cases, the flames and heat can actually damage electrical lines or other equipment.”

The ISO deals with the fire threat all summer long, but the Fourth of July holiday poses a special kind of challenge. California fire officials say drought and pests have killed thousands of acres of forests throughout the state—compounding the fire danger. The situation is already critical, and it will only get worse as trees and brush dry out even more through the summer.

California utilities play an important role in reducing fire danger. “In order to provide safe and reliable electric service to our customers, we keep our 112,000 miles of power lines free and clear of vegetation,” said Terry Morford, Pacific Gas and Electric Company’s director of electric transmission and distribution. “To help prevent wildfires that could potentially result in power emergencies, we encourage all Californians to be fire safe this weekend and all summer long.”

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Southern California is certainly not immune for fire danger either. “Clearing our transmission lines of vegetation is a year-round job,” said Ron Ferree, Southern California Edison’s grid operations director. “Last year’s devastating wildfires are a strong reminder that we’re still dealing with drought, trees killed by insect infestation, and thick, dried-out grass in some areas. Everyone needs to be careful in high fire-risk areas.”

The ISO also works closely with state officials to monitor wildfires, identify threats to electrical facilities, and if possible, minimize the impact on power delivery. During summer wildfires the ISO stations a former fire official at the California Department of Forestry (CDF) headquarters to gather and relay information about where fires are burning and which direction they’re heading. “If we know about a fire before it affects the grid, we can take steps to try to avoid a power outage,” said Detmers. “Sometimes a fire impacts transmission lines before anybody knows it’s burning, but coordination and communication with the CDF and the U.S. Forest Service can buy us some valuable time.”

The California ISO is a not-for-profit public benefit corporation charged with managing the flow of electricity along California’s open-market wholesale power grid. The mission of the California ISO is to safeguard the reliable delivery of electricity, and ensure equal access to a 25,000 circuit miles of “electron highway”. As the impartial operator of the wholesale power grid in the state, the California ISO conducts a small portion of the bulk power markets. These markets are used to allocate space on the transmission lines, maintain operating reserves and match supply with demand in real time.

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