



CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

## Regulators criticized Edison's wildfire safety actions months before deadly Eaton fire



Line crews from PG&E work to fix line in caused by the Eaton fire in Altadena on Monday, Jan. 13, 2025 in Altadena, CA. (Jason Armond/Los Angeles Times)

By Melody Petersen and Jenny Jarvie

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- Less than three months before the Eaton fire, state utility safety regulators questioned whether Southern California Edison's

repairs to its aging transmission lines were holding up.

- The utility's visual inspections of splices in its transmission lines sometimes failed to find dangerous conditions, officials found.
- The company says its work has reduced the risk that its equipment might cause wildfires by more than 85%. It said its own analysis showed its equipment didn't start the Eaton fire.

State regulators criticized Southern California Edison for falling behind in inspecting transmission lines in areas at high risk of wildfires just months before the deadly Eaton fire, according to state documents.

Utility safety officials also said the company's visual inspections of splices in its transmission lines were sometimes failing to find dangerous problems, according to [their October report](#). Instead, those problems were not discovered until the company inspected the lines with X-ray equipment, which is far less frequently used.

The report by the California Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety was issued less than three months before devastating wildfires broke out in Los Angeles County last week. [Fire investigators say](#) they are looking into whether the company's electrical equipment was involved in starting the Eaton fire, which has killed at least 17 people and destroyed thousands of homes and other structures.



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Edison said its work to mitigate wildfires had reduced the risk of catastrophic fires by 85% to 90% compared with the risk before 2018.

“As we have been doing, SCE will continue to perform inspections in its high fire risk areas more frequently than is required,” the company said in a statement to The Times.

Four lawsuits [were filed this week](#) accusing Southern California Edison of sparking the Eaton fire. The company says its reviewing the lawsuits. It said earlier that its analysis showed its equipment didn’t start the fire.

Videos and photos taken by residents show what may be the first flames of the fire, burning at the base of an electrical transmission tower before racing down a canyon toward homes.



Power lines in Eaton Canyon on Sunday, Jan. 12, 2025 in Pasadena. (Brian van der Brug/Los Angeles Times)

Fire agencies are [also investigating](#) whether the company’s equipment started last week’s Hurst fire near Sylmar, which led to mandatory evacuations and burned nearly 800 acres before crews got it under control. A downed powerline was discovered near

one of the company's transmission towers. Edison said it doesn't know whether the damage occurred before or after the start of the fire.

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Joseph Mitchell, an expert on California utilities' wildfire mitigation plans, said the October report by regulators raised concerns for the 15 million people living in Edison's territory.

Mitchell said the X-ray equipment that Edison told regulators was finding problems that its other inspections missed was "not in wide use and not easy to use."

"You won't be able to examine the entire transmission infrastructure with the X-rays," said Mitchell, a board member of the Mussey Grade Road Alliance, a group working to improve fire safety in the state.

In their October report, regulators questioned whether the company's repairs to its aging transmission lines were holding up over the months and years.

When a tree or wind damages or breaks an electric line, crews use splices, which are steel sleeves, to reconnect and repair the line.

If there is a problem with the splice, the transmission line could fall.

Safety regulators asked Edison for information on its inspections of the transmission splices, including the age of each splice and the cause of the problem that was found.

The utility said in [a response to regulators](#) sent a week later that it would be difficult to gather that information.

The company said that “given the high find rate” of problems with the splices, it was considering “forgoing the inspection and moving straight to remediation.” To do that, it said, it was considering a program to replace the splices, beginning in 2026.

Executives also told regulators that in areas with high fire risk they were falling behind on the number of transmission lines they planned to inspect. They said they had reduced the planned inspections this year from 28,000 to 24,500 “due to environmental and access constraints,” according to the October report. Regulators said the company “must improve its response” to those constraints because its equipment in those areas “still present[s] wildfire risk.”

In its response, Edison told regulators that to compensate for the reduced number of inspections it would focus on transmission equipment most susceptible to failing and make repeated attempts where inspections were incomplete.

The regulators’ report, as well as the company’s wildfire mitigation plan for this year, is scheduled to be considered by the state Public Utilities Commission at a Thursday meeting. It is included on the commission’s consent agenda, on which items are routinely approved without discussion.

Edison said it expected the commission to approve its new plan. “Our plans have been approved every year,” it said.

The company estimated that it spent more than \$1.8 billion last year on work aimed at mitigating the risk of wildfires. Some of the money was used to install electric lines with

a coating that greatly reduces the risk of fire. The company [said last year](#) that it had installed more than 5,600 circuit miles of coated wire in the last five years.

Michael Wara, a Stanford University energy and climate law professor who was appointed to a state commission on wildfires, said the philosophy of California's utility regulators is one of pushing companies toward continuous improvement.

"Their position is nobody's perfect, and what we expect of you is that you get better every single year," Wara said. "There's no such thing as safe. There's safer than last year, and that's what that regulator is trying to push the utilities every year to achieve."

Several of California's most destructive wildfires have been caused by transmission lines, rather than the smaller distribution lines like those connecting homes.

The 2018 Camp fire, which destroyed the town of Paradise and killed 85 people, was traced to a high-voltage transmission line, owned by Pacific Gas & Electric, that was nearly 100 years old.

The Kincadee fire in Sonoma County in 2019 was sparked by a broken jumper cable on a PG&E transmission tower.

Wara noted that the transmission line had been inspected not long before the Kincadee fire broke out.

Robert McCullough, an electric utility consultant in Portland, Ore., said he believed the L.A. wildfires would result in major changes to how utilities inspect their equipment.

"We are going to have to change our approach," he said. "We have to do this much, much better."

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