

WILDFIRES

SoCal Edison says equipment likely caused Hurst Fire



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(This story has been updated to include new information.)

Southern California Edison officials conceded in a regulatory filing on Thursday that its equipment likely sparked the Hurst Fire in Southern California, which burned nearly 800 acres in the Sylmar area and stretched fire agencies even thinner as they fought the massive Eaton and Palisades blazes.

But in a separate filing, they said to date they had found no proof its equipment was tied to the ignition of the Eaton Fire. Investigations continue into the cause by SCE, the Los Angeles Fire Department and attorneys for plaintiffs who lost their homes and have sued the utility.

The Hurst Fire, which erupted on Jan. 7 and was fully contained on Jan. 16, did not result in any structures being destroyed or cause any deaths, unlike the Eaton and the Palisades fires, which killed a combined 29 people, destroyed more than 9,400 homes and charred nearly 58 square miles. But it is the third time in 18 years that residents of Sylmar, northeast of Los Angeles, have fled wildfires likely sparked near SCE equipment above them, and in some cases died or lost homes.

Both filings with the California Public Utilities Commission lay bare parts of the major grid that powers Southern California, and spell out power line surges, malfunctions and other "faults" that occurred during unprecedented Santa Ana winds that reached as high as 80 mph that week.

Residents of Sylmar told the USA Today network that they heard popping noises and a loud explosion, then saw an orange ball of fire erupt below a huge transmission tower at the edge of the Angeles National Forest above them.

Though not spelled out in the SCE report, Sylmar is also a key transmission corridor for the West Coast. It continuously brings enough live current from Oregon's hydroelectric facilities and central and Northern California to power 3 million Los Angeles County homes. Veteran energy disaster researcher Robert McCullough told The Desert Sun last month that if the Hurst Fire had jumped the 210 freeway, millions of people would have been plunged into darkness during howling winds.

SCE admitted in its filing that a conductor failure — meaning damaged or broken wire within a cable or other equipment — occurred on a huge transmission tower north of Saddle Ridge Road the night of Jan. 7, causing damaged equipment to fall to the ground at the base of the tower.

Paul Pimentel of SCE wrote that while the Los Angeles Fire Department continues to investigate, "absent additional evidence, SCE believes its equipment may be associated with the ignition of the Hurst Fire."

No clear cause yet for Eaton Fire

SCE has been targeted in multiple lawsuits charging its equipment sparked the Eaton Fire, which burned 14,021 acres in the Altadena and Pasadena areas. The cause of that fire is still under investigation, and likely will be for months, but attorneys have pointed to both witness reports and surveillance video that appears to show its power lines arcing in the vicinity of the fire's origin on Jan. 7.

While SCE and its parent company, Edison International, said they would continue to investigate the cause of the deadly blaze, its Feb. 6 report to the state utilities commission said issues it has documented that occurred that day with transmission lines and other equipment occurred in areas that are miles from the ignition site, and on corridors not tied directly to transmission lines there.

In a related news release, the company said "information and data have come to light, such as videos from external parties of the fire's early stages, suggesting a possible link to SCE's equipment, which the company takes seriously. SCE has not identified typical or obvious indications that would support this association, such as broken conductors, fresh arc marks in the preliminary origin area, or evidence of faults on the energized lines running through that area."

Pedro Pizarro, president and CEO of SCE's parent company, Edison International, said in the news release that "while we do not yet know what caused the Eaton wildfire, SCE is exploring every possibility in its investigation, including the possibility that SCE's equipment was involved."

U.S. EPA administrator Lee Zeldin on Thursday also visited neighborhoods impacted by the fires, accompanied by Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and other federal officials, including FEMA's Regional Administrator Bob Fenton and Army Corps Major General Jason E. Kelly. He said there are nearly 1,200 field personnel in the area, and EPA is currently undertaking its largest wildfire cleanup in history.

"Our EPA staff is on the ground working quickly to get as many properties cleared of hazardous materials as rapidly and safely as possible," said Zeldin. "We will recover, and we will rebuild."

Power lines and wildfires: A lethal mix

Failed electric equipment and poor maintenance have caused horrific blazes in recent years, sometimes sparked by the smallest of parts, according to government investigators. The 2023 fire in Maui that killed 102 people was caused by "reenergization" of broken power lines during high winds that showered sparks into dense, dry vegetation.

The 2018 Camp Fire, California's most deadly to date, started after a single worn-out metal hook on a PG&E transmission tower failed, allowing a live line to hit a transmission tower, which created temperatures as high as 10,000 degrees and melted metal wire and tower pieces. Along with hot sparks, the molten metal fell into drought-stressed trees and grasses, setting them alight.

There are known measures that can help, experts say, including turning off power when high winds rage in bone-dry vegetation, prepositioning not just fire crews but electric crews at vulnerable substations and lines, and, most costly, burying power lines. For now, the fires keep coming.

Residents in Sylmar have fled major wildfires three times in the past 18 years. And each time, the flames tore through transmission towers or old power poles, according to witnesses and formal investigations.

The 2008 Sayre Fire burned more than 600 homes, including 480 mobile homes, and melted fire hoses. Until January's devastating firestorm, it held the record for most structures destroyed in a Los Angeles wildfire. County fire department arson investigators said SCE equipment started the fires, and the utility, while not admitting wrongdoing, said a substation had malfunctioned before it began.

The 2019 Saddle Ridge Fire began in almost the exact same spot as the Hurst Fire, killing a man and burning 8,800 acres, according to CalFire reports. The ignition site was identified by LAFD arson investigators as a 50-foot-by-70-foot area beneath a high-voltage transmission tower. A CPUC special investigator concluded SCE had not properly maintained two parts — a small, Y-shaped insulator fitting and a skyline "jumper wire" that led to a cascading chain of fiery events in which parts of three transmission towers 3 miles apart caught fire.

This time, the Hurst Fire burned less than 800 acres and no homes or lives were lost. That's partly due to an immediate, massive firefighting response and well-practiced neighborhood alert systems.

But energy disaster researcher McCullough said undergrounding lines in high risk areas like the Sylmar corridor "absolutely must be done." The CPUC estimates it would cost \$763 billion total to bury all the state's overhead lines. The focus should be on the highest risk areas, McCullough said, which would still not be cheap, but which he said would save lives.

Other energy disaster experts say properly coating high risk transmission equipment and other less costly measures could be implemented instead. Los Angeles Dept. of Water and Power, which co-owns the Sylmar transmission corridor and serves customers in the Palisades Fire area, is not required as a public utility to provide state regulators with reports. But its latest wildfire mitigation plan shows just 16 miles of its more than 11,200 miles of live power lines overhead have been wrapped in spark-resistant materials.

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