

Judge appears satisfied with PG&E's wildfire preparations

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U.S. District Judge William Alsup

SAN FRANCISCO -- There was "at least one instance" when a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. contractor responsible for trimming and cutting trees falsified records, the utility's attorney told the federal judge handling its criminal probation Tuesday.

Despite the revelation in response to a report that its vegetation management program is running behind, U.S. District Judge [William Alsup](#) appeared satisfied with PG&E's progress to prepare itself for the upcoming wildfire season. A court-appointed monitor reported last month PG&E is failing to trim or cut thousands of trees near power lines that pose a wildfire threat and properly maintain records around high-risk vegetation and inspector training.

The monitor, Mark Filip, found "at least one dubious tree" in nearly half of the 1,550 vegetation management projects inspected. The company's contractors are "missing numerous trees that should have been identified and worked under applicable regulations," he said,

"Thus, not only is PG&E falling short of its [goals] for the year, but the quality of the completed work is questionable," the report reads.

Contrary to earlier hearings, Alsup did not grill the utility over falling behind its 2019 goal of hardening 150 miles of power lines to reduce wildfire risk. But he did inquire about why it chooses to rely on contractors rather than full-time employees.

The utility industry generally has contractors do vegetation management work, responded PG&E attorney Kevin Orsini, adding PG&E hopes to "bring more of the work in house where we can." Some 4,500 people, most of them contractors, are inspecting and trimming trees, he continued.

PG&E CEO Bill Johnson said he expects to add more employees to the vegetation management program soon. "The need was so great and rapid this year, we just couldn't do it that way. We had to bring in contractors," he said.

Concerned about the reported instance of falsification of records from a contractor, Alsup threatened to refer the matter to the U.S. Attorney's Office for prosecution if it happens in the future. He said to warn contractors during training that a "U.S. district judge has asked you to report to me anyone that you suspect has falsified reporting."

The utility's new vegetation management program is "unprecedented in scope," Orsini said, noting a few shortcomings are expected.

Not only is PG&E now clearing trees near power lines beyond the minimum regulatory clearance guidelines, inspectors are being instructed to completely remove trees -- even if they are healthy -- if they are among those identified as a top 10 high-risk species likely to spark a wildfire. Both steps are actions "no other utility in the country is currently doing," Orsini continued.

Johnson said the utility has cut or trimmed 900,000 trees and will double the figure by the end of the year.

In response to concerns over its failure to properly maintain vegetation management and inspector training records, PG&E said it has significantly increased its personnel, all of whom use an application to update gaps in the records. Tree inspectors are also now required to take a competency test to work for the utility.

"The basic idea is you have at least four different sets of eyes who are trained better, are talking to each other more often, and we're providing better technology every day to minimize the number of trees missed," Orsini said.

Filip agreed with PG&E that its "in the very early stages" of its reform efforts and "further refinements will be needed."

Consistent with Alsup's directives, the utility also expects to "de-energize "its power lines "more than ever this year," Orsini said.

"It turns out the judge, we and the monitor all have the same thing in mind: safety and protecting the public," Johnson said. "We're engaged in a program never seen before in the U.S. or anywhere I'm familiar [with]."

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