

PUC looks at SDG&E, Cox roles in blazes

Agency wants to see if regulations broken

By J. Harry Jones
STAFF WRITER

The state agency that oversees public utilities has opened two investigations to determine whether SDG&E and Cox Communications violated any regulations regarding maintenance of their power lines and equipment, found to be the ignition points of three wildfires last year.

The inquiries also will try to find out whether San Diego Gas & Electric Co. failed to cooperate with the state agency's staff in its investigation of the fires.

Hearings will be held to allow the companies to show why the Public Utilities Commission should not find violations, and why the PUC should not impose penalties if violations are found, according to a news release the commission issued last night.

The release did not explain the type of potential penalties, or when the hearings might occur.

Investigators for the PUC's Consumer Protection & Safety Division found two months ago that power lines caused the Witch Creek, Guejito and Rice Canyon fires in North County.

Combined, those blazes destroyed more than 1,300 homes, killed two people, burned ranches and farms, and disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

The report concluded, as did a Cal Fire report in July, that the Witch Creek fire began Oct. 21, 2007, when 69-kilovolt overhead conductors between two SDG&E poles contacted each other during high winds in a remote area near Santa Ysabel.

The consumer division also said that on Oct. 22, a sycamore tree limb broke and fell on SDG&E's 12-kilovolt conductors between two poles near Rice Canyon Road in Fallbrook, causing the conductors to break and fall to the ground.

The Guejito fire, which be-

► WILDFIRES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

Cox and SDG&E broke PUC rules, report declares

gan early the morning of Oct. 22 in the San Pasqual Valley and eventually merged with the Witch Creek blaze, started when a Cox Communications lashing wire contacted a 12-kilovolt power line, the consumer division report found.

The report said SDG&E and Cox violated PUC rules in all three instances.

When the report came out in September, SDG&E issued a statement rejecting virtually every finding and last night issued another statement that read in part: "We already have stated we disagree with the conclusions of the CPSD report and don't believe the report includes evidence to support its claims. We look forward to providing the Commission with the facts to back up our opinion now that the Commission has determined the appropriate forum."

In a separate statement issued in September, Cox Communications also said evidence did not support the report's conclusions and recently said the company was in full compliance with all rules at the time of the Guejito fire. The report also said SDG&E obstructed the investigation into what happened in all the fires by not making witnesses and evidence available to investigators in a timely fashion. SDG&E has denied the allegation.

The fires have spurred dozens of lawsuits. Some legal experts have estimated that liability could reach more than \$1 billion.

Last week, the PUC announced it is considering strengthening its rules and regulations regarding the inspection of power lines in light of the 2007 fires.

J. Harry Jones: (760) 737-7579;
jharry.jones@uniontrib.com