

# The Next Step in Wildfire Mitigation - Standards for Identifying and Removing Trees Adjacent to Power Lines



*The Tree Care Industry urges Congress to establish standards for identifying and removing trees and other vegetation adjacent to powerlines. Minimal federal standards will help establish a comprehensive approach to wildfire mitigation.*

The Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) represents approximately 1,400 businesses nationwide that engage in commercial tree care, providing services to residential communities, state and local governments, commercial businesses, and utilities. Collectively, TCIA members employ more than 150,000 people, representing an estimated 75% of all tree care workers in the country.

TCIA members play a critical role in wildfire mitigation and management. Vegetation-management crews work to cut back brush, limb trees, and fell hazardous trees on or near power lines to prevent ignition sources. TCIA's non-line-clearance members also contribute to wildfire prevention by working with homeowners, commercial companies, and local governments to create defensible spaces around homes, buildings, and infrastructure. The tree care industry trains and equips arboricultural workers with the knowledge to address wildfire risks, which is essential for protecting both the workers and the communities they serve. Some vegetation management firms have even developed and implemented training protocols for their workers that mirror training given to wildland firefighters, providing a robust understanding of fire prevention and the proper use of firefighting tools and equipment.

## **The Issue: Increasing Wildfires and Liability Risks**

Wildfires have become an increasingly severe threat to communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). Since 2005, over 89,000 structures have been destroyed by wildfires, leading to numerous deaths and enormous personal losses. Entire towns have been devastated, emphasizing the pressing need for effective wildfire mitigation strategies. Across the U.S., over 70,000 communities and 44 million homes are at risk from wildfires in the WUI. Recent years have tragically demonstrated the destructive power of wildfires, with notable incidents including the 2020 Labor Day Fires in Oregon, which burned more than 1.2 million acres, destroyed roughly 5,000 homes and buildings, and killed nine people; the 2021 Marshal Fire in Colorado that burned 6,000 acres, destroyed 1,000 homes and businesses, and caused over \$2 billion in damage; the 2017 Tubbs Fire in California that killed 22 people; and the 2023 Maui wildfire, the deadliest U.S. wildfire in over a century, which killed 115 people, destroyed over 2,200 homes and structures, and caused over \$5.5 billion in damages. These horrific tragedies highlight the vulnerabilities many communities still face and underscore the urgent need to address wildfire risks effectively.

The increasing frequency and severity of wildfires highlight the urgent need for comprehensive management strategies, especially for electric infrastructure. Electric utility corridors are increasingly threatened by these natural disasters, posing a direct impact through infrastructure damage and an indirect risk when trees and vegetation come into contact with energized lines. Over time, or under certain

For more information on this issue,  
please contact Basil Thomson at [Basil@UlmanPolicy.com](mailto:Basil@UlmanPolicy.com)

conditions such as high winds or extreme weather events, limbs or entire trees can fall onto power lines, igniting surrounding vegetation and significantly heightening the risk of wildfires.

Tree care companies, including TCIA members, face significant liability concerns due to their role in managing wildfire hazards. As the threat of wildfires and the associated liability for damage and injury escalate, the tree care industry grapples with high insurance rates and difficulties obtaining coverage. Insurance carriers that write coverage for vegetation management retain more risk and charge unsustainable premiums; costs can range from \$100,000 to \$400,000 per \$1 million of excess liability.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the number of carriers willing to provide coverage has significantly decreased, with many only offering policies with wildfire exclusions. This is especially true for tree care companies operating in high-risk areas, which include 117 million acres of federal land classified as high or very high risk of wildfire risk.<sup>2</sup> These high costs and lack of coverage have made it increasingly difficult for contractors to afford and perform essential tree care work, highlighting the need for solutions to address these challenges and ensure the continuity and effectiveness of wildfire mitigation efforts.

### **TCIA's Solution: Standard of Care Guidelines**

As the threat of wildfires continues to escalate – particularly those caused by electric infrastructure, TCIA's recommended solution is to establish consistent rules and processes regarding the standard of care for pre-inspection of hazard trees in vegetation management plans. Establishing minimum standards for identifying and mitigating wildfire ignition risks will support predictable and sustainable operations for contractors while enhancing safety and reliability in high-fire-risk areas. TCIA believes establishing a national standard of care would yield numerous benefits, including more effective wildfire prevention, standardized risk assessment practices across states, and improved accessibility and affordability of insurance for contractors.

In addition, TCIA supports government funding and grant programs that provide resources for wildfire mitigation work. Programs like the Community Wildfire Defense program offer vital financial support to at-risk communities. These grants help develop community wildfire protection plans and implement projects that reduce wildfire risk. However, the effectiveness of these grants may be compromised without addressing the liability and insurance challenges faced by tree care companies. By ensuring these programs are well-funded and expanded, and establishing a national standard of care, communities can effectively engage tree care professionals and other experts in wildfire mitigation efforts.

### **Congress Can Help Mitigate and Manage Wildfire Risk**

TCIA sincerely appreciates the work that Congress is doing to assist with mitigating and managing wildfire risks through funding, legislative efforts, and elevating conversations on the issue to the federal level, and TCIA is committed to supporting initiatives aimed at establishing national standards that prioritize safety, professionalism, and sustainability within the tree care industry. The industry stands ready to collaborate with Congress and other stakeholders in developing and implementing a crucial standard of care.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: Mark Shipp, CTSP certified insurance counselor.

<sup>2</sup> Hoover, Katie, "Federal Wildfire Management: Ten-Year Funding Trends and Issues (FY2011-FY2020)," October 28, 2020, CRS, R46583.

For more information on this issue,  
please contact Basil Thomson at [Basil@UlmanPolicy.com](mailto:Basil@UlmanPolicy.com)