



OCEC to Include Fire Safety Shutoffs in its Fire Mitigation Plan

Across the west and here in the Methow Valley, longer, drier, more dangerous fire seasons have become the new normal. In response to this, OCEC has developed a Fire Mitigation Program. This program works towards lowering risks of trees outside the easements and the required clear zones around the wires from getting into the overhead lines and creating an ignition source. These actions are based on similar programs California utilities developed in response to recent fires in their areas. Recently, the 2020 fires in Oregon have prompted OCEC to add the potential for Fire Safety Shutoffs (FSS) to its fire mitigation plans.

Background

OCEC has an ongoing right-of-way maintenance program to manage vegetation posing a threat to power lines. OCEC has augmented this program by bringing in an outside forester in 2019 and again in 2021 to survey the lines and the trees outside of the easements. OCEC also relies on members to notify us of large branches or hazard trees that could potentially fall through the lines on windy days. If you encounter these situations, please report them to the OCEC office.

In addition to vegetation management, OCEC will take the extra step to minimize the risk of fire during red flag conditions by turning off substation reclosers during these conditions. A recloser is an automatic high-voltage electric switch that operates much like a circuit breaker in your home. When a household breaker trips, it will remain off until it is manually reset. A recloser will test the electric line by automatically closing to see if the problem has been removed, if the problem was only temporary, the recloser will stay closed and power will remain on. This operation is sometimes seen as a “blink” at your home.

To mitigate the risk of fire, OCEC will place the reclosers on “non-reclose” so when there is a possible problem, the breaker will operate and the line will be de-energized until OCEC crews can manually inspect the line for problems. Once the line is manually inspected and it is all-clear, the line will be re-energized. This will possibly create longer, more frequent outages. Also, certain remote forested areas will have their reclosers turned off starting when dry conditions warrant it.

Fire Safety Shutoffs

A Fire Safety Shutoff (FSS) is when a utility proactively de-energizes an overhead line so that if a tree falls into the line, a fault (and possible fire) will not result. This would occur during certain red flag/high wind conditions. Trees outside the easements that could fall into the lines are the biggest concern.

Conditions Driving FSS Decisions

The following conditions are examined when making FSS decisions:

- Weather conditions
 - Red Flag Conditions
 - High forecasted or actual sustained winds
 - High forecasted or actual wind gusts
 - Low relative humidity
 - Recent history of low precipitation
- Vegetation conditions
- Field observations and flying/falling debris
- Situational awareness
- Expected duration of conditions

After a Fire Safety Shutoff Event

During an FSS event, conditions are continuously monitored. When conditions indicate that an FSS is no longer needed, lines are patrolled during daylight. Lines need to be patrolled in daylight so the patroller can visually see that the lines are clear to be re-energized. The length of these outages depends on several factors and cannot be determined before a specific FSS event occurs.

Membership Help During FSS Events

As part of our plan to support customers during Fire Safety Shutoffs, OCEC may establish a general community resource center at the Barn in Winthrop.

This resource center will provide members affected by power shutoffs a place to go for information. Members will have access to water, snacks, ice, and cell phone charging.

These resource centers may not be immediately available if the FSS is an emergency and there is no lead time to set it up. If an emergency FSS outage looks prolonged, OCEC will then establish the resource center. If an FSS is predicted, OCEC will open the resource center and have it ready in case an FSS occurs. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the resource center at the Barn will not be implemented until 2022.

What Members Can Do to Prepare

Members will need to self-supply energy needs if desired during an FSS. Generators are an excellent way to self-generate power during electrical outages. Please contact an electrician or OCEC for more information. Among other things, a member can do the following to prepare:

- Have a back-up source of power. Loss of power to critical equipment such as well pumps, medical equipment, and irrigation cannot be avoided without self-generation or battery back-up.
- Have a plan for household items/medications that need refrigeration or freezing.
- Sign up for OCEC text messages.
- Sign up for the Okanogan County Emergency Management System.

Taking these pro-active fire safety steps during red flag conditions may cause more frequent and longer outages but we hope that our members will understand the benefits of reduced risk outweigh the increase in possible outages.