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BPA takes blame for destructive East Hill fire Heat, sagging power line led to tree explosion

by Jamie Swift
Journal Reporter

The Bonneville Power Administration accepted blame Thursday for an electrical surge that sparked a fire that destroyed one house and damaged another.

"You learn from these incidents and take corrective action," said Ed Mosey, a spokesman for BPA, the federal agency that operates more than three-fourths of the high-voltage power lines in the Northwest United States.

"We have a very good record," Mosey said. Still, he said, this type of incident occurs about once a year.

Current from a sagging 500,000-volt power line jumped to a tall cottonwood tree that the BPA should have trimmed or cut down, Mosey said.

Power lines tend to sag in times of extreme heat, Mosey said. The agency takes the sagging effect into consideration when designing the enormous towers that support the BPA lines, he said.

The current made its way through the tree and into the ground, igniting two house fires Wednesday on Kent's East Hill, in the 28600 block of 152nd Avenue Southeast. The surge also started a brush fire two blocks away.

The tree exploded, causing a ferocious boom and sending chunks of the trunk as far as 100 feet away.

"If there is an object that is connected to the ground close enough to the power line, you get what's called an arc. The current will literally jump off the line," Mosey said.

No one was seriously injured in the fires, though one resident was treated for smoke inhalation. A family of four was displaced.

Mosey said the transmission system's equipment worked properly, sensing that the line had been grounded and simultaneously shutting down.

"Once the tree burned, removing the cause of the grounding, the line went back into service," Mosey said.

The grounding, or arc, lasted just seconds and there were no apparent blackouts, Mosey said.

"We are constantly patrolling by air and by ground to make sure there are no objects or trees that would pose this kind of danger," Mosey said.

"In this particular case, there was (a tree) that needed some attention," he said.

The BPA monitors more than 15,000 miles of transmission lines in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana.