

PG&E targets removal of trees Utility offers incentives to yank walnuts harming lines

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Pacific Gas & Electric has created a voluntary buyout program aimed at getting walnut growers to yank out fast-growing trees that otherwise must be trimmed hard each year to prevent problems with transmission lines.

PG&E has just begun sending letters about the new \$5 million-plus program to an estimated 40 growers in San Joaquin County, said utility spokeswoman Emily Barnett.

The utility has already generated interest from some growers, she said.

Under the program, which could run between three and five years, growers would get a one-time payment at the going current market rate for acreage that would be taken out of walnut production.

They could collect the money and still use the land for other crops, such as row crops or grapevines -- agricultural production that doesn't threaten power transmission with orchard-tree suckers.

Even though PG&E says that walnut trees are the main headache in the effort to keep agriculture tree limbs away from transmission lines, the program wouldn't allow any type of tree planted under the lines.

Paul Maben, regional vegetation program manager for PG&E, said he expects there will be many takers.

"We're hoping. We're hoping," he said.

The program follows an aggressive trimming season this year by PG&E that angered many growers, who charged that PG&E got so overly ambitious that crews cut back branches well beyond space requirements.

Growers such as Mario Podesta then predicted that would cause the trimmed trees to react with an outburst of suckers, unwanted shoots or branches that would sap tree energy and wipe out nut production.

That happened, he said as he walked among walnut trees Tuesday morning on his 95-acre orchard east of Stockton along Highway 26. Some of the suckers were so vibrant that they hung down like grapevines from the tops of the trees that had been trimmed by PG&E crews at the beginning of the season.

Podesta said that he hadn't heard about the voluntary program from PG&E but that he would be interested in talking to utility representatives.

"We're not going to get anything out of those trees anyway," he said.
"It'd be good for them, too. One payment and they'd be through -- for the right price."

Barnett said there will be \$205,000 available to be meted out to growers through the end of this year, and then \$1 million per year for another three to five years.

"We're not sure how much we can accomplish per year," she said.

One million dollars per year would be enough to pay for the voluntary removal of approximately 3,000 walnut trees, she said. The program would operate "first come, first served."

Barnett said she couldn't say how much the utility might be paying per acre, because that will vary from area to area. Podesta said he thought his affected property could go for up to \$20,000 per acre.

Each buyout would be negotiated between a PG&E agricultural representative and the grower.

"We understand this affects their livelihood," Barnett said. "We empathize, and we understand how they can be upset by having us going out there and trim."

However, the utility must aggressively trim walnut trees beneath major transmission lines each year as required by state and federal mandates, she said.

The utility had agreements with some walnut growers in the county that allowed growers to keep the trees beneath transmission lines properly trimmed back.

That ended this year, Barnett said, after there were six "contacts" -- branches touching power lines or "flashing over" from lines to nearby branches -- in 2004.

Maben is responsible for keeping vegetation clear from 3,300 miles of big-tower transmission lines as well as 18,000 miles of smaller distribution lines in his district, which runs between Alpine County and Fresno.

His biggest headache, by far, has come from the walnut orchards in San Joaquin County, he said.

Nothing puts out suckers like walnut trees, he said.

"We want no trees at all, but it's all negotiable."