

Ky., Ind. don't have rules for utility tree-trimming

Ky.: State standards 'unworkable'

BY JAMES BRUGGERS • JBRUGGERS@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM • FEBRUARY 1, 2009

Though trees are the leading cause of power failures in the United States, almost no state -- including Kentucky and Indiana -- has regulations that dictate how frequently or aggressively trees along power lines running through neighborhoods should be trimmed.

The Kentucky Public Service Commission studied the issue three years ago but decided statewide standards would be "unworkable" because of the diverse nature of the state's utilities and their customers, said the agency's spokesman, Andrew Melnykovich.

However, in a 2006 order, the PSC required utilities to develop plans to manage vegetation and submit them for review.

"The commission's feeling ... was that we ought to be looking more at overall reliability," Melnykovich said.

The federal government has requirements for allowing room around the higher-capacity transmission lines that often carry electricity across state lines, said Derek Vannice, executive director of the 2,500-member Utility Arborist Association.

For lower-voltage distribution lines, some states have established standards for pruning cycles, or they have directed that utilities follow guidelines established by national safety or industry groups, he said.

But most don't have their own standards, he added.

And even with the best power line maintenance, there will be outages in ice storms, he said.

"Nobody is going to allow for the kinds of clearances you need to protect against an ice storm," Vannice said. "You'd basically have to clear a path. People aren't going to want that kind of a superhighway in their backyard."

Officials with E.ON U.S., the parent of Louisville Gas & Electric and Kentucky Utilities, said they trim branches on a three- or four-year cycle. They said they do not want property owners trimming around power lines because of the potential for electrocution.

Crews seek a space between limbs and wires of between eight and 16 feet, depending on the species of tree and how fast it grows.

"The biggest struggle we run into is customers who don't want their trees cut back," said Chip Keeling, an E.On spokesman.

While the utility has the authority to trim any branches near power lines, if the job requires access across private property, it becomes a matter of negotiation, he added.

Utility complaints

Melnykovich said the PSC has received a steady stream of complaints from customers since ice started knocking out power across the state last week.

Many are complaining that they can't reach their electric utility by phone, while others are simply upset that their service hasn't been restored yet.

Keeling said the scope of the ice storm explains why it will take days for LG&E and KU to restore power. The utilities are dealing with 16,000 downed lines across 50 counties and contending with difficult winter weather.

About 3,000 workers -- a mix of E.On employees, private contractors and workers from other utilities through a mutual aid program -- have been assembled to do the repairs, Keeling said.

He said it would not be practical or affordable for E.On to have a full-time staff large enough to handle such a major outage.

"It would be like Churchill Downs trying to staff year-round for Derby," Keeling said.

Taking overhead utility lines and burying them to prevent future problems with ice storms is also not practical, Keeling said, noting that that would cost about \$1 million per mile and require coordination with cable television and telephone utilities.

Reporter James Bruggers can be reached at (502) 582-4645.