

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR LINDSEY P. HORVATH

November 18, 2025

Advancing Fire Safety and Infrastructure Resilience through Utility

Undergrounding in the Unincorporated Santa Monica Mountains

Targeted undergrounding of utility lines in high fire-risk areas is a proven strategy to strengthen community resilience against extreme weather events and to help mitigate the likelihood and severity of wildfires. By placing electrical and telecommunications infrastructure underground, the risk of equipment-related ignitions is significantly reduced and evacuation routes remain safer during emergencies. The recent Palisades and Eaton Fires emphasized the real dangers of above-ground infrastructure and emphasized the urgent need to expand undergrounding efforts in high-risk fire zones.

Southern California Edison (SCE), the primary electric utility company in the unincorporated Santa Monica Mountains, and the County of Los Angeles, are currently implementing a targeted utility undergrounding program in high fire risk zones to enhance public safety and community resilience. SCE has committed to undergrounding approximately 40 miles of infrastructure, including extensive work already completed on the Las Flores/Rambla Pacifico area. Additional undergrounding

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projects are on track for completion along Topanga Canyon Boulevard and Pacific Coast Highway by the end of the year.

However, this undergrounding effort is being impeded by the lack of cooperation by the telecommunications industry (telecoms), which continue to maintain above-ground infrastructure in the unincorporated Santa Monica mountains, including telecoms who own or lease the poles through a joint pole agreement or otherwise. Under the existing “Joint Pole Agreement” between SCE and telecommunications providers, each utility maintains its own equipment on shared poles. While SCE is following through on its commitment to underground its lines, the telecommunications companies sharing these poles have refused to do the same, leaving hazardous poles in and adjacent to the public right-of-way and putting the community at continued risk, as these poles can ignite or fall and block evacuation routes. There is a particular risk in areas with only one or a limited number of evacuation routes, like the unincorporated Santa Monica Mountains, where the terrain limits possible evacuation routes. Additionally, trenching once is critical to minimize disruptions, especially in communities like Topanga where residents are heavily impacted by ongoing and repetitive construction.

Past fires have shown the consequences of inaction. During the 2018 Camp Fire in the Town of Paradise, utility poles and fallen wires blocked evacuation routes, contributing to devastating loss of life. Following the fire, electric utilities began undergrounding their infrastructure in high fire-risk zones, but telecom companies were hesitant to participate. In 2020, the Town of Paradise filed a formal complaint with the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) which ultimately led to coordinated and ongoing undergrounding across all utility providers.

The continued presence of above-ground utility lines in high-fire risk areas is a clear and preventable danger. Telecommunications providers in the unincorporated Santa Monica Mountains have failed to make meaningful progress toward undergrounding or to cooperate and negotiate with SCE and the County. To protect lives, property, and critical infrastructure, the County should take formal action pertaining to the telecommunication providers to ensure that undergrounding efforts proceed without delay.

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors instruct the Department of Public Works, in consultation with County Counsel, to initiate proceedings, including but not limited to filing a complaint, with the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) on behalf of the County of Los Angeles, directing telecommunications companies to underground their infrastructure in coordination with SCE's undergrounding projects within or near the Palisades Fire burn scar area in the unincorporated Santa Monica Mountains.

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