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November 2, 2023

Via Electronic Mail

Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety
715 P Street, 20th Floor
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: Comments to Electrical Undergrounding Plans (Docket #2023-UPs) for Guidelines for the 10-Year Electrical Undergrounding Distribution Infrastructure Plan

ExteNet Systems, LLC (U 7367 C) and ExteNet Systems (California) LLC (U-6959-C) (collectively "Extenet") hereby submits comments on the Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety ("Energy Safety") for the 10-year Electrical Undergrounding Distribution Infrastructure Plan (Undergrounding Plan) set forth in SB 884 ("Guidelines").[1]

The Guidelines do not address how utility poles will be managed and/or maintained for use by communications providers with attached equipment after undergrounding of electrical lines. As discussed in detail below, Extenet respectfully submits that the disposition of utility poles has a direct bearing on an assessment of the effectiveness of undergrounding as a means to reduce wildfire risk. Therefore, Extenet asks that the Guidelines be revised to include an explicit consideration of the effect of the possible elimination of vertical infrastructure needed to support communications services needed by first responders and residents during wildfires.

Extenet deploys small cell and mobile technology, including 5G, that supports mobile broadband and 911 service throughout California. These services support wildfire early-detection systems and are important for first responders to communicate and coordinate fire-fighting efforts and warn citizens of impending evacuations and dangers during wildfire emergencies. The facilities to support wireless communications services must be placed above ground. Extenet attaches its equipment to utility poles, particularly in more remote areas such as Wildfire Threat Zones 2 and 3 where availability of other vertical infrastructure is sparse. Thus, the continued availability of the utility poles required to support telecommunications services necessary to combat wildfires and ensure safety must be considered as a factor in evaluating the effectiveness of the large electric utilities' 10-year undergrounding plans.

[1] Codified at Cal. Pub. Util. Code § 8385, 8388.5

SB 884 directs Energy Safety to approve an undergrounding plan only if a large electrical corporation has shown that it will substantially increase electric reliability and "*substantially reduce the risk of wildfire*". However, the current Guideline draft does not address the effect of undergrounding on the availability of infrastructure to support wireless communications equipment, which must necessarily be placed above ground. If undergrounding results in the loss of wireless communications equipment and services, it will increase wildfire risk because first responders may have difficulties receiving or sending data from early detection sensors, and they may be unable to communicate warnings, evacuation orders and other essential messages to the public during wildfires.

TIME Magazine recently featured fire detection sensors in its Best Inventions of 2023 edition. TIME recognized the collaborative work of the University of San Diego and Cal Fire to deploy early detection systems utilizing cameras and wireless connectivity to alert authorities of potential fire threats and actual ignition. The TIME article noted that the wildfire detection system detects smoke and other early indications of fire on a feed from a network of more than 1,050 cameras placed in forests across the state. In the first two months, the system correctly identified 77 fires before any emergency 911 calls were received.[2] If poles are undergrounded, a critical component in such fire detection systems may be lost because communications equipment will be displaced.

Public Utilities Code Section 8388.5(d)(2) directs Energy Safety to approve an Undergrounding Plan if the large electric company has shown that the Undergrounding Plan will not only substantially increase electric reliability but also "substantially reduce the risk of wildfire". Section 8388.5(c)(4) directs that Energy Safety must conduct a comparison of undergrounding versus aboveground hardening of electrical infrastructure and wildfire mitigation and evaluate the scope, cost, extent, and risk reduction of each activity, separately and collectively, over the duration of the plan. The comparison must "emphasize risk reduction and include an analysis of the cost of each activity for reducing wildfire risk, separately and collectively, over the duration of the plan."[3] Pursuant to this provision, Energy Safety's analysis should include an assessment of the increased wildfire risk caused by a loss of utility poles needed for emergency communications services that enable early detection and and/or assist in fire-fighting efforts.

If the latest technologies for early wildfire detection and are impeded and first responders are unable to communicate warnings, evacuation orders, and other essential messages, the risk of wildfires becoming even more devastating is almost certain. Thus, it is critical that the existing utility pole infrastructure in California remain available for use by telecommunications providers even after electric utilities underground their electrical facilities.

The current draft of the Guidelines, however, do not consider the possible increase in wildfire risk caused by undergrounding that displaces wireless communications equipment.
Part II.b. of the Guidelines asks for comments on the components of an undergrounding plan:

[2] TIME Magazine, by Pranav Dixit October 24, 2023 7:00 AM EDT, https://time.com/collection/best-inventions-2023/6327137/alertcalifornia-ai-wildfire-detector/ (emphasis added).
[3] Cal. Pub. Util. Code 8388.5(c)(4).

> Section 8388.5(c)(2) requires the large electrical corporation to identify the undergrounding projects that comprise the plan. Energy Safety intends to require the large electrical corporation to provide the circuit number, mileage, and location (including whether the project is in a tier 2 or tier 3 high fire-threat district or rebuild area) for each undergrounding project. What other information should be provided for this identification? Should the large electrical corporation include projects located in utility-identified high fire risk areas (HFRA)?

Extenet recommends that Part II.b. of the Guidelines be revised to include a requirement that large electrical utilities must identify all utility poles included in an undergrounding project, disclose whether each of those poles has communications equipment attached, and provide its planned disposition of poles with communications attachments (*i.e.* whether the pole will be left in place, timeframe for removal if the pole will be removed, etc.). The electric utilities should also be directed to offer the communications attachers the option of retaining the utility pole so long as the pole does not demonstrably pose a wildfire risk. If the electric utilities do not offer such option, then an assessment of the increased wildfire risk due to the loss of critical communications facilities should explicitly be included in Energy Safety's analysis of the undergrounding proposal.

Extenet is committed to maintaining and continuing to deploy wireless technologies that can ensure first responders and Californians have reliable communications systems available to assist in reducing the devastation, duration, and scope of wildfire emergencies. To that end, Extenet respectfully requests that Energy Safety make the revisions requested in these comments.

Sincerely,
/s/ Anita Taff-Rice
Counsel for Extenet Systems, LLC

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