

## **Stop The Connecticut Chain-Saw Massacre**

The Public Utility Regulatory Authority (PURA) has one last opportunity to put the brakes on a radical utility line-clearing proposal that would remove any tall tree growing within eight feet to the right and to the left of utility distribution lines, from ground to sky, regardless of the health of the tree.

This crisis was generated by legitimate efforts, since gone awry, intended to address the widespread power outages caused in part by trees falling on power lines during Tropical Storm Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The General Assembly passed P.A. 13-298, setting up a legal framework for “vegetation management” around utility lines, defined as the “pruning or removal of trees, shrubs, or other vegetation that pose a risk to the reliability of the utility infrastructure, and the retention of trees and shrubs that are compatible with the utility infrastructure.”

Subsequently, the state’s two public utilities, Connecticut Light & Power and United Illuminating, proposed a clear-cutting program calling for the removal of all “tall growing tree species” within a newly-established “Utility Protection Zone.” The line clearing would be effectuated through what was cynically termed “enhanced tree trimming” (ETT). CL&P has already begun to aggressively remove or radically prune tall trees growing in neighborhoods and in town centers within “Utility Protection Zones” in its service area.

The PURA, which is charged with reviewing the ETT plans, issued a draft decision essentially adopting wholesale the utilities’ proposals without considering the extensive report filed by a Gubernatorially-created committee of experts known as the State Vegetative Management Task Force. The Task Force called for a balanced approach through pruning and removal standards based on professional assessments and planned tree replacement.

After widespread public outcry, the PURA agreed to hold additional technical meetings and public comment sessions. These hearings have been well-attended, with citizens decrying the extensive removal of healthy trees in town centers and other urban areas by CL&P. Speaker Brendan Sharkey has introduced legislation to mitigate some of the worst features of the proposed ETT, but the utilities are already moving forward, making it critical that the PURA act immediately to stop the ongoing tree removal while better alternatives are being considered.

The PURA must rectify its draft decision that adopted ETT as an inflexible default standard, and take the Task Force’s recommendations into account. Specifically, the PURA should call for a stepped-up effort towards removal of trees that are a significant risk because of structural defects or in poor health with numerous dead limbs. Standards for determining which trees should be removed should not be left to a contractor with a truck and a chain saw, but should “be guided by the insights and knowledge of qualified professionals . . . in a manner that also includes a commitment to the stewardship of our roadside forest.” Although some apparently healthy trees may need to be removed due to root growing conditions or problems specific to the tree species, wholesale removal of healthy roadside trees imposes significant costs on communities, their residents, and businesses due to the loss of the benefits provided by such trees. As the Task Force stated, “there is no “one size fits all” solution. The impact of ETT would be

disproportionately high in urban areas where a much higher percentage of the total trees line the streets, sharing the same airspace as utility lines. Urban areas are also the most in need of the benefits of trees.

Nobody wants to live in a state without power. Nor does anyone want to live in a community without trees. The PURA can act to improve power reliability while at the same time making sure that tall and tall-growing healthy trees currently under an arbitrarily-imposed death sentence will live to see another Spring.