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Energy Markets Policy
Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
PO Box 1473
Wellington 6140

Email: HazardsFromTrees@mbie.govt.nz

Kāpiti Coast District Council Submission on the Review of the Electricity (Hazards from Trees) Regulations 2003.

1. Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the proposed revision of the Electricity Regulations.
2. Kāpiti Coast District Council, like all Councils, has a dual interest in the Review of the Electricity (Hazards from Trees) Regulations 2003: both as lead agency in local emergency management, and as a vegetation owner across our District.

The importance of lifeline utilities in local emergency management

3. Kāpiti Coast District Council acknowledges the importance of lifeline utilities and the significant impacts that can result from a loss of service in an emergency situation. These impacts were seen on a large scale in the wake of Cyclone Gabrielle, but also reflect our experience in small-scale weather events within our own district.
4. Within the last 12 months, our Council has had an emergency activation as the result of tree fall onto power lines following an adverse weather event. These trees were on private property and had fallen across the sole access road into a rural community and onto powerlines. The risk of further trees falling further complicated our emergency response and the ability of the utility provider to reinstate power to the community, which remained out for an extended period of time. Communications into the community were severely compromised when the cell phone towers went offline as their back-up batteries were depleted.
5. It is our view that the ability to maintain lifeline utilities in emergency situations, including adverse weather events, is of significant importance. We also appreciate that the risks to our network are likely to increase as climate change results in these weather-related emergencies becoming more common and more severe. It is therefore timely to review the regulations to ensure that risks are being appropriately managed.

An unfair cost burden on Councils as vegetation owners

6. While we support the need to manage the risks to lifeline utility services in an emergency, as noted above, we also need to ensure that the costs of maintaining services are fairly allocated between the utility providers and the vegetation owners

(in many instances, Councils). Power lines are often run along roading corridors, which means that Councils are more often than not the owners of trees that are within close proximity to power lines. The ongoing costs on Council to comply with these regulations is therefore significant when it is viewed across the entire District.

7. We are concerned that the proposed regulations are unfairly shifting the cost burden of maintaining a resilient electricity network onto the vegetation owners. We contend that resilience of the electricity network can be enhanced in two main ways:
 - a. Utility providers can invest in network upgrades, including the undergrounding of lines.
 - b. Vegetation owners can maintain their vegetation in a way that minimises the risk to overhead lines.
8. In our experience, the undergrounding of existing overhead powerlines to increase resilience in power infrastructure was commonplace in the 1990s as an ongoing incremental reinvestment in infrastructure by power companies and as a hazard mitigation measure. However, anecdotally, this investment has not appeared to have been taking place more recently, and the onus has instead shifted primarily to vegetation owners to mitigate risks to electricity transmission from tree fall.
9. The investment in undergrounding electricity transmission lines comes at a cost, however it also reduces risk to the network from a range of natural hazards beyond those associated with tree fall. Overhead lines are liable to damage from a range of adverse weather events, including heavy snowfall, cyclones, and tornadoes – even where tree fall is not an issue. These risks will remain (regardless of tree maintenance) unless additional network upgrades and investment is undertaken. Climate change is only going to make these events more likely, and by focusing primarily on vegetation management, other hazard risks to the network are going largely unaddressed by network providers.

Unintended consequences

10. As a major vegetation owner in proximity to power lines, Councils (and by extension, ratepayers) are going to bear most of the costs associated with implementing these regulations. In an inflationary environment with our communities under pressure from increasing costs of living, it is going to become increasingly difficult for Councils to justify the ongoing maintenance requirements for trees along our roading corridors.
11. We expect that increasing costs will result in Councils choosing to remove trees that fall within the scope of these regulations rather than committing to ongoing maintenance costs. However, the removal of these trees will come at a significant cost to our communities and our environment. This potential for widespread removal of street trees in town and cities across New Zealand would result in:
 - a. The fragmentation of green corridors, breaking apart the network of green spaces that supports biodiversity across our district and region
 - b. Fewer green spaces in our urban environments, which will negatively impact on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of our communities
 - c. Fewer trees to store carbon and help us combat climate change
 - d. The loss of important urban shade, leading to the heating of our cities
 - e. Increased windspeeds in urban areas
 - f. Reduced air quality.
12. In summary, while we support the need to maintain a resilient electricity transmission network, we are concerned that the costs of maintaining this network is being

increasingly shifted onto Councils and is disincentivising investment by our network operators in valuable resilience upgrades. We are also concerned that a need to manage costs on ratepayers will result in the loss of trees and a range of negative impacts on our communities and environment.

13. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comment on the proposed regulations.

Yours sincerely



Darren Edwards
Chief Executive | Te Tumuaki Rangatira
Kāpiti Coast District Council

