

State Senator Jerry Hill Responds to Cal Fire's Latest Findings in October Wildfires

SACRAMENTO – State Senator Jerry Hill released the following statement on Cal Fire findings released today on the causes of 12 of the October wildfires.

“Today’s findings are yet more evidence that the old normal is firmly in place when it comes to PG&E and its practices,” said Senator Hill, D-San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. “Climate change and the so-called new normal do not ignite fires. The Cal Fire findings today show that suspected negligence by PG&E did.”

Senator Hill noted that the investigation results for eight fires sent to prosecutors for review include five instances in which falling trees, a broken tree top or branch came in contact with PG&E power lines to cause fires, and three instances of PG&E equipment failure.

“In one of those cases – a downed power line – the hazardous situation was exacerbated by PG&E’s practice of automatically and repeatedly re-energizing a line in an attempt to restore power without determining why the power was cut in the first place,” Senator Hill said. “With a downed power line in a forest, that’s like striking a match in a tinderbox. That’s what ignited the Pythian Fire, according to the investigation.”

“The investigation results should be viewed in context with PG&E’s long history of falling short on system safety and maintenance, rather than statements extolling the utility’s practices,” Senator Hill also said. “It is an affront to the families who have lost loved ones in tragedies caused by PG&E negligence -- like the San Bruno explosion in 2010 and the Butte Fire in 2015 -- to even suggest that the utility has been meeting state standards for safety.

“PG&E is a convicted felon on federal charges of violating gas pipeline safety laws in connection with the explosion in San Bruno that killed eight people and leveled a neighborhood. PG&E also was convicted of obstructing justice during the investigation of the explosion for concealing the utility’s practice of pumping natural gas through lines at pressures higher than legal limits. The company is still serving five years of probation for those federal convictions. In addition, the utility was fined \$8.3 million for causing the Butte Fire.”

So far, Cal Fire has completed [investigations](#) into 16 of the October fires and found that all 16 involved PG&E equipment. Findings in 11 of the fire investigations have been handed to prosecutors, who will be looking at evidence of alleged violations of state law. The law requires safe maintenance and operation of power systems, including maintenance of a specific amount of clear space around power lines. To date, Cal Fire investigators found 12 fires were caused by trees or parts of trees coming into contact with PG&E power lines, and eight of those 12 tree-caused fires are among the investigations under review by district attorneys’ offices for possible prosecution.

“That means flawed vegetation management is suspected in two-thirds of the October wildfires caused by trees,” Senator Hill said. “If that isn’t enough to belie PG&E’s claim of ‘industry-leading’ practices, consider what a news station found just one month after the October

firestorms. Last November, [NBC Bay Area reported](#) that one in every 100 trees checked by PG&E or its contractors typically pass inspection even though they are too close to power lines.

“With at least 55 million trees near power lines in PG&E’s service area, that would amount to more than half a million trees at risk of coming into contact with a power line and causing a fire. It remains to be seen whether that risk had a direct role in any of the October fires.”

###

Resources:

Cal Fire Release on Wildfires, Friday, June 8, 2018:

http://calfire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/newsreleases/2018/2017_WildfireSiege_Cause.pdf

Cal Fire Release on Wildfires, Friday, May 25, 2018

[http://calfire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/newsreleases/2018/2017_WildfireSiege_Cause%20v2%20AB%20\(002\).pdf](http://calfire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/newsreleases/2018/2017_WildfireSiege_Cause%20v2%20AB%20(002).pdf)

Senator Hill’s May 25 Statement on Cal Fire’s Findings in the October Wildfires:

<http://sd13.senate.ca.gov/news/2018-05-25-senator-hill-issues-statement-results-cal-fires-first-completed-wildfire>