

Bill to expedite the undergrounding of PG&E lines passes two powerful committees

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Senator Mike McGuire's bill, SB 884, that will safeguard communities and save lives by expediting the undergrounding of electric utility lines in California's highest fire risk zones, overwhelmingly passed two major policy committees last week. SB 884 is supported by CalFire firefighters and it passed the Senate Energy Committee and the Governance & Finance Committee this week.

"For far too long, America's largest utility – PG&E – has failed its customers and made California unsafe. For years, the utility underfunded modernization and wildfire safety efforts, which has had devastating impacts. The only path forward is to move power lines underground in the most high fire risk regions. SB 884 will save lives and ratepayers money," McGuire said.

PG&E has been charged with nearly 100 felonies in the deaths of California residents in wildfires they caused over the past four years. Californians have literally run for their lives to escape flames from these utility-caused wildfires.

Undergrounding electric lines reduces the likelihood of fires starting by 99% and will vastly reduce carbon emissions by stopping mega fires before they start. SB 884 will expedite the undergrounding of 10,000 miles of utility lines, while saving ratepayers money by using federal infrastructure funds. Currently, PG&E undergrounds approximately 100 miles annually.

“Year after year, these utility-caused wildfires have become our reality. This insanity must be stopped for the health and safety of all Californians,” said McGuire.

Here is what the bill will do:

- Mandated performance metrics would be implemented by the California Public Utilities Commission on undergrounding projects, including timelines for completion and penalties for not hitting deadlines, and the utility would have to prove safety protocols are met prior to receiving a rate of return.
- Develops a pathway to expedite undergrounding construction by establishing a shot clock for local government permit approval/denial to just 150 days.
- The legislation would save ratepayers money by mandating that utilities use available federal infrastructure funds to construct the undergrounding project before using ratepayer funds, and it would mandate telecommunication companies to underground their utilities in the same trench as the electrical undergrounding.
- This dig-once policy will help as a cost share and help make our state telecommunication system more resilient, especially in the highest risk zones.
- Guarantees a 270 day judicial review in California courts if an undergrounding project faces a California Environmental Quality Act lawsuit.