Of course, there are some differences between the Oregon Coast and California. Our high winds usually hit in winter, when conditions are wet. Yet, we don’t take potential fire risk lightly—even on the Oregon Coast we certainly do get some dry summers. In August of 2016, a fire east of Depoe Bay burned over 200 acres. Admittedly it was a small fire, but it illustrates the risk is there, as many of our power lines cross through forested areas. And, of course, trees and branches coming into contact with our lines increases the risk of fires. Accordingly, we are constantly trimming trees and vegetation around our poles and lines with full-time, year-round, in-house crews. Every summer we also contract with tree management companies for additional trimming help.

We understand that it is of extreme importance that we maintain line clearance from trees and vegetation in these rights of way throughout the entire district and to maintain the structural integrity of our power lines. By doing so, not only do we protect the area we love and call home, but we also reduce the risk of outages, thereby guaranteeing a much greater reliability of service to our customers.

The events in California have led to heightened awareness about wildfires at the state level. Our General Manager, Randy Grove, has agreed to serve on the Governor’s Wildfire Response Council to help develop wildfire mitigation plans. And, we’ve met with staff of Portland General Electric and Pacific Power to discuss their wildfire mitigation planning as well. The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) notifies us of logging operations along our transmission lines so we can interact with those companies. We also follow ODF’s industrial fire precaution levels which are quite stringent when forest conditions are dry. We are planning to participate in “AlertWildfire,” a system of cameras placed at high mountaintop points and/or on microwave towers offering better forest visibility and hopefully faster response to wildfires to get them under control more quickly.

Central Lincoln has close relationships with most of the many fire departments serving our service area, which includes ten cities, and parts of four counties. We recently participated in a wildfire “tabletop” exercise with Lincoln County’s emergency services personnel, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), and regional fire districts.

Internally, Central Lincoln has an interdepartmental team to monitor wildfire-related issues. We have redundant lines to reroute power in case we need to do so. And we perform thorough transmission line inspections regularly.

To paraphrase Smokey the Bear: ‘All of us can prevent wildfires.’ We’re doing our part, and we encourage you to call emergency personnel if you see unattended or illegal fires in our forests, or contact us if you see potential hazards around our lines.

Wildfires raging in California last year.
Since the courts are moving slowly, I thought this time I would share some thoughts on cybersecurity. I’m an IT guy in my day job, so I have a keen interest in the world of cybersecurity. Utilities are prime targets for cyberattack. Nation-states are focused on cybersecurity as the new weapon in warfare. If you can cripple the infrastructure of the country you’re attacking, victory could be much easier. Utilities must be at the top of their game to survive such a situation. Your Board has always supported funding technology to improve and modernize our system. This provides you greater reliability and is good for the environment, too. Utilities these days are becoming more of a technology company than just an electricity delivery company. That means that there is a lot of technology to protect.

Your technology staff at Central Lincoln is very diligent. We recently hired a company to test the vulnerability of the network and we passed with flying colors! But what is well-known in the cybersecurity world is the biggest vulnerability is human. Sophisticated ‘phishing’ emails are used to entice humans to inadvertently download code that can be used to access the network. To combat this problem, all of our staff go through stringent training to improve their skills to identify fraudulent emails.

This battle is not a ‘one and done’ process. Cybercriminals continue to develop more sophisticated ways to attack. Policies, protocols and processes must be continuously updated to protect against new attack methods, and staff training must continue as additional traps are set for the human element in cyber defense. Know that your PUD does not want to be held hostage by cybercriminals and is actively working to make sure your electric supply is secure.
We then looked at the potential for putting a system on the roofs of our two buildings in Florence at the corner of Highways 101 and 126 when we remodeled last year, and made certain they would be ready for solar. We applied for and received a $50,000 grant from the Bonneville Environmental Foundation and will receive a grant of 35% of the purchase and install costs from the Oregon Department of Energy. The system will be 81 kilowatts, costing about $169,700.

This fall, our customers will be able to “buy” up to five panels for about $330 a panel. The energy output of their panels will then offset some of their monthly billed usage. We’ve calculated a payback of 9-10 years for customers to recover their $330/panel investment, and project the system will generate 85,000-90,000 kWh per year for at least 20 years, which may prove to be an excellent investment long-term. However, power generated will be entirely dependent on the weather—the number of grey days will impact output—so we can’t guarantee how much power will be generated each year.

To give everyone the same chance to participate, postcards will go out to every customer on the same date in the near future, and we will be taking orders at that time. In the meantime, please don’t contact our offices about the project as we won’t be ready to offer participation or more info until the postcards are mailed out.

Emerald PUD’s Community Solar project in Eugene.
Our mission is to ensure our communities have access to reliable and affordable energy products and services.