

Wildfires inspire new idea: Charging rural customers more for electricity

By David R. Baker, San Francisco Chronicle

The cost of preventing power-line wildfires could rise so high that California's top utility regulator recently suggested a new way to pay for it – charge residents of high-risk areas more money for electricity.

Michael Picker, president of the California Public Utilities Commission, floated the idea during a Jan. 31 meeting on fire safety for utility companies. With more Californians moving into rural areas prone to fires, he questioned the fairness of forcing all utility customers to pay the costs of preventing rural wildfires sparked by utility lines.

“Should we actually start to charge differentially for the use of the distribution system for those sections that are in the high-fire-hazard zone and people who choose to live there?” Picker said.

While it wasn't a formal proposal, Picker said in a follow-up interview that it's an idea worth discussing.

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