



Oregon
Rural
Electric
Cooperative
Association

March 2, 2023

Chair Sollman
Vice-Chair Findley
Senate Committee on Energy and Environment
900 Court Street NW
Salem, Oregon 97301

RE: SB 443, Relating to Back Up Power

Good afternoon, Chair Sollman, Vice-Chair Findley, and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Debi Wilson, and I am the General Manager of Lane Electric, a distribution electric cooperative headquartered in Eugene. Lane Electric provides electricity to over 10,500 members, over 2,600 square miles in rural Lane County. Residential accounts comprise about 78% of our total sales. Lane Electric provides power to 14 towns and cities, including Oakridge, which was recently identified as the poorest town in Oregon. I am here today to testify on behalf of Lane Electric and the Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative Association, which represents 18 electric cooperatives that serve over a half-million Oregonians with affordable, reliable, and nearly carbon-free electricity.

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on SB 443, but before I do, I wanted to give some background on what has transpired in the last couple of years that perhaps has brought us here today – and our shared goal with Senator Hayden to protect our most vulnerable populations during emergency situations.

In 2020, the Holiday Farm Fire devastated the town of Blue River whom we serve. The State of Oregon – and this Legislature – stepped in to help that community in so many ways. And for that I am forever grateful.

Yet, we never want to go through this experience again and last September, based on a Red Flag Warning for extreme fire weather issued by the National Weather Service, and after conversations with emergency responders, county officials, and

other utility providers, we made the difficult decision to implement a Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS).

This was an extreme measure that several other utilities in the area also used based on the same criteria. While we had already set system equipment to high-sensitivity and had crews stationed throughout the system to respond if needed, we felt the risk to the community, our members and first responders was too great to keep lines energized. No matter what the duration, we understand the impact outages have on our members – the same people Senator Hayden is seeking to protect with this proposal.

Lane Electric continues to prioritize enhancing and protecting our system to limit outages and speed up restoration time. In fact, over 50% of our power lines are underground, and we continue to build on that number to limit the exposure of above ground lines to extreme weather events. But there will be outages and the question remains, how do we best protect our members?

We have some concerns with SB 443 based on several factors, including the potential cost of providing back-up generators on a primarily residential rural utility with a relatively small customer base to spread the costs across. Nor do we necessarily have all the income and other data outlined in the bill to provide these generators. That data resides with government agencies who are best able to determine eligibility for the various types of assistance already in place. There are also some mitigating factors, particularly for consumer-owned utilities. Not every PSPS is the same. Our power supplier – the Bonneville Power Administration – has initiated public safety power shutoffs. It is not our decision and often happens with little advance notice.

Regardless of the cause of the power outage, we must carefully patrol our lines before we can safely re-energize. While urban electric utilities serve 30-plus homes per line mile, Lane Electric serves fewer than eight. That means there is more line to patrol to reenergize homes following an outage.

But what Senator Hayden has identified with this proposal is a new reality for electric utilities in high-risk areas – and the need to look for creative solutions. We do not have all the answers, but we know we need to communicate. At Lane

Electric we hold district meetings and communicate in every way that we can to educate members about how they can prepare for power outages, what to do if they come across a downed power line, or even a Cascadia event.

I am proud of the work we have done and will continue to do. It is our responsibility given the nature of our work. However, during extreme weather caused outages there is sometimes confusion about the division of responsibility between that of a utility and that of emergency management services. Cities and counties are better equipped, and better able to respond to the public during emergencies than us. During these outages our resources are directed to power restoration. During one such outage we were asked by members when we planned to contact the Red Cross – a responsibility of the aforementioned agencies. I'm grateful our members see us as a trusted resource during an emergency event, however, we do not have the resources or expertise to respond in the way emergency services could.

I look forward to working with Senator Hayden on how we can best help our most vulnerable and fragile members during emergencies. As I mentioned before, the safety of our members, employees, and the public is my number one priority.

Thank you for your time today and I am happy to take any questions.

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