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[You support DOE's strategic plan](#)

[Clearing tree encroachment can prevent outages](#)

[Apprentices train through the winter](#)

[Partnership Council prepares for 2007](#)

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[brief transmissions](#)

[industry briefs](#)



## Clearing tree encroachment can prevent outages

by Deborah Wiig

If a tree falls in the forest...can it plunge several coastal cities into darkness? Yes, it can, and that's exactly what happened several times in the last few years.

In the summer of 2003, the nation's worst black-out--which cut power in several northeastern states -- was caused in large part by a single tree in Ohio that made contact with a line. In October 2005, an outage in California was caused by a tree that fell on a line as contractors were clearing trees. Other outages on the west coast have been traced to vegetation hazards.



*A loader-type, rubber-tired platform reaches out with its specially designed head and removes the top of the tree.*

"A tree doesn't have to actually fall onto a line to cause an outage," explained Rocky Mountain Region Field Maintenance Manager **Ron Turley**. "If one gets close enough to the line, within what's called 'minimum approach distances,' electricity can actually jump to the tree, 'drawing an arc' and travel down its length." In cooler weather under light load conditions, lines may hang at a safe distance from the trees. But in summer, lines sag lower due to high ambient temperatures and heavy loading conditions, increasing the risks of coming too close to the trees.

Heavy ice loading on lines and high heating energy demands in the winter can also be a problem, Turley added. So keeping vegetation under control is a priority for Western, not only to maintain our own standards, but to comply with Federal regulations.

"Traditionally, tree clearing has been done by a 'lop-and-scatter' method," he said, "cutting the tree with chain saws into six-to-eight-foot lengths and laying them on the forest floor. However, this practice can contribute to beetle infestations and increased fuel loading, increasing fire risks. The "lop-and-scatter" method is still used occasionally on severe slopes where equipment cannot be used and also where the Forest Service has requested Western leave cut tree sections

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