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PUC member wants to delay changes to power-line rules

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A member of the California Public Utilities Commission has recommended against changing the way power lines are regulated until formal investigations into the Witch Creek fire and other wildfires are completed.

Commissioner Timothy Simon filed his draft report late Tuesday in response to a petition submitted by San Diego Gas & Electric Co. in November.

Members of the public have 30 days to comment on the report, which the full commission is to consider later this year.

As fires raged out of control last fall, SDG&E filed paperwork with state regulators seeking clarification about how overhead power lines across California should best be managed to reduce the threat of wildfires.

Simon said the whole discussion should be delayed until state officials investigating the Witch Creek and other fires finish their review.

Proposed rule changes “are premature because the commission’s Consumer Protection and Safety Division has not yet completed its investigation of recent wildfires ignited by overhead power lines,” the report says.

“The commission will respond appropriately to the recent wildfires after CPSD completes its investigation and the causes of wildfires, including the role of overhead electric lines, are better understood.”

Simon also based his recommendation on the fact that SDG&E’s petition did not contain specific suggestions or procedures regarding the maintenance and operation of power lines.

Power lines caused at least three of the fires that erupted across San Diego County in October, state investigators have said. Cal Fire and the utilities commission have not released final reports on the causes of the fires.

According to preliminary Cal Fire findings, a power line outside Ramona started the Witch Creek

fire. The blaze killed two people, destroyed 1,125 homes and charred nearly 200,000 acres.

Christy Heiser, an SDG&E spokeswoman, said the utility was “very disappointed” in Simon’s recommendation. “It’s an important issue for the state that needs to be addressed now.”

Environmentalists said the draft report reflects a growing concern among public officials about the fire threat posed by overhead power lines.

David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity said Simon is on the right track in wanting to await results of the fire investigations before considering any changes to rules regarding power lines.

“Residents of suburban San Diego County and elsewhere may not know it, but one of the greatest threats to their safety and property may be wildfires ignited by backcountry power lines during high winds,” he said.