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Defensible and Data-Driven: The New Baseline for Wildfire Mitigation

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Introduction

For utilities operating in the ever-growing swath of fire-prone regions, wildfires aren't inherently bad. And anywhere utilities provide electric power, there will always be some risk of fire.

But the risk of assets or communities burning? That's another story, and one we need to get smarter about addressing.

Rather than spinning their wheels (and burning their cash) aiming for zero risk, innovative utilities today are shifting to defensible, data-backed wildfire programs. Using data to inform prioritization of work, teams are making smarter decisions, using resources more effectively, and building credibility and critical collaboration with regulators and the public.

“ This isn't about clearing everything. It's about doing the right work in the right place with the resources available.”

- Phil Chen, Overstory

A layered wildfire mitigation approach starts with situational awareness, operational changes, preventative maintenance, and system hardening. For networks of 800 miles or 8,000, satellites and AI together can offer the scalable, efficient solution for that critical system-wide understanding of risk that utilities need.

“ Most of our wildfire-related concerns come from the fall-in of trees into our lines and rights of way. We maintain those to the extent that we can, but a lot of the trouble trees are big, dying aspens that look healthy. Satellite data from partners like Overstory helps us identify those trees and mitigate risk before they fall, which is really cool.”

- Bryan Hannegan, HCE

Like Holy Cross Energy, Northern Lights, Inc. and Inland Power and Light and are putting Overstory's vegetation intelligence to work to mitigate critical wildfire risk across their network. Here's how.



How Northern Lights Cut Hazard Tree Risk

When trees in your service territory grow up to 130 feet tall, but your right-of-way is only 40 feet wide, managing vegetation becomes a matter of safety and reliability.

Northern Lights, Inc. faced this challenge across more than 1,500 miles of overhead power lines in a densely forested area of the Pacific Northwest. In 2023, they partnered with Overstory to launch a predictive AI vegetation management program.

The results

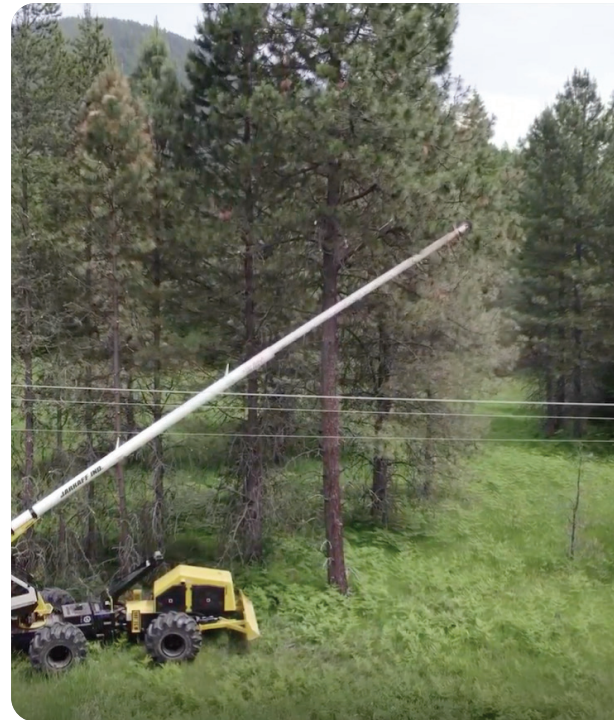
- Tracked and modeled nearly half a million strike trees.
 - Identified approximately 14% of lines as having no vegetation concerns, enabling more efficient resource allocation by focusing efforts where they're most needed.
 - Reduced hazard trees (trees within striking distance of conductors that also show signs of decline) by approximately 76% in just two years.
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“ The nice thing about that was that we started the project in June. By October we had actionable data that we could start making decisions based upon.”

- Matt Price, NLI

Today, one employee oversees the program, supported by Overstory's satellite intelligence and vegetation risk modeling. In the two years since Northern Lights started partnering with Overstory, they've reduced hazard tree counts by approximately 88%.

They've fundamentally changed their program from reactive cycles to data-informed prioritization, increasing safety and optimizing spending efficiency.



How Inland Power and Light Minimized Outages in High Priority Zones

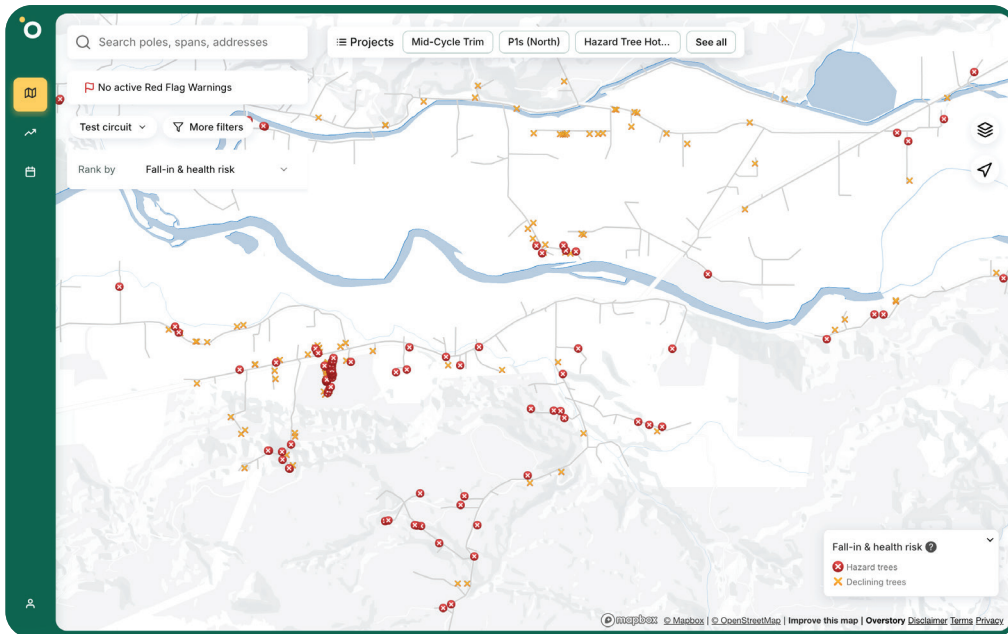
IPL knew they had risk on their network, but not how much. They needed to go beyond quantifying risk, to start prioritizing vegetation management work in the areas of their network that needed it most.

Their first scan with Overstory identified 76,000 hazard trees—dead or dying trees within striking distance of their lines. The next step was putting that data to work to understand where to start.

“Data is great. I’m a data guy. But data by itself doesn’t do anything for you. It has to be able to be put into action in some way.”

- Patrick Larsen, IPL





Hazard tree maps in the Overstory platform help utility teams identify risk from dead and dying trees within striking distance of lines. Using these maps, they can prioritize what work matters most to reduce likelihood of ignition.

Overstory's flexible data delivery made that possible. By fitting seamlessly into Inland's existing workflows, the vegetation risk analysis empowered the team to start planning more informed contractor work and field inspections.

The results

- Identified a list of just 335 targeted trees needing work in high-priority zones (based on wildfire risk, tree health, and proximity to critical assets)
- Focused efforts on just 4% of total scanned area, enabling team to create repeatable processes and scale future efforts
- Created repeatable foundation for maturing wildfire mitigation program

This plan unlocked more productive conversations with local fire districts and grant-funded fuels programs—all possible through Overstory's clear, field-ready risk analysis. A risk-based approach, backed by objective data, became the foundation for better coordination and a more effective operations program.



Clear vegetation risk data facilitates more productive conversations—with local fire districts and emergency services—around ignition risk, fuel load, and resource management.

The data and increased operational efficiency also helped Larsen make the case for a bigger budget.

“ You can’t manage 5,000 miles at once... But with technology, you can identify what work we need to do now to make the most meaningful difference.”

- Patrick Larsen, IPL

As utilities confront an increasingly volatile landscape—ecologically, financially, politically—they have to make a critical shift from reactive maintenance to proactive strategy. They need defensible decision-making and specific, informed action.

With this strategic shift, teams like Northern Lights and Inland Power are driving closer collaboration with their communities, and ultimately, safer, more reliable power. Their stories illustrate what’s possible when teams start with a system-wide picture of risk and then use data and informed action to move forward.

Making the most of every dollar and decision isn’t just progress anymore. It’s the new baseline.

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