May 5, 2026

Mr. Thomas A. Torres
State Forester
Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management
1110 W. Washington St., Ste. 500
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Submitted electronically to utilityplans@dffm.az.gov

Re: Wildfire Mitigation Plan Program

Dear Forester Torres:

The Big Park Regional Coordinating Council[1] ("Big Park Council" or "BPC") appreciates the opportunity to provide comment to the state Department of Forestry and Fire Management (the "Department" or "DFFM") in connection with a legislative mandate that certain utility providers submit wildfire mitigation plans to your office for a substantive review and final approval.[2]

Background

As a non-profit focused primarily on local land-use issues and located in a territory serviced by Arizona Public Service ("APS"), BPC submits these comments to the Department with recommendations on ways to improve the APS wildfire mitigation plan (the "Plan" or "APS Plan") prior to final approval.

House Bill 2201, which was enacted last year by the Arizona legislature, outlines the new requirements for the wildfire mitigation plans. Besides establishing a special standard of care for utility providers in the event of wildfires caused by downed power lines and utility work, HB 2201 promotes wildfire mitigation planning by requiring certain utility providers to submit an updated mitigation plan every two years to the State Forester. The State Forester, in turn, is

[1] Big Park Council is a 501 c (3) representing approximately 23 local homeowner associations in the Village of Oak Creek in addition to local businesses and educational institutions. BPRCC serves as the voice of the community and provides feedback on public policy issues to federal, state and local government agencies.

[2] *See* "Wildfire Mitigation Planning," Chapter 7, Section 1, Title 30, Arizona Revised Statutes, as amended. Available at https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/57leg/1R/laws/0167.pdf.

required to provide public notice and an opportunity for the public to comment "on a submitted wildfire mitigation plan" during the review process.[3] Under the law, the State Forester may delay or deny approval of a plan, presumably until the utility responds to the Department's request for additional information.

With regard to wildfire mitigation plans, HB 2201 requires each submitted plan to be 1) reasonable (i.e., based on the company size and its resources); and 2) in the Public Interest.

As the primary subsidiary of Pinnacle West Capital, APS is the largest electric utility in Arizona with a monopoly service territory spanning thousands of miles and serving more than 1.3 million customers. Pinnacle West Capital is a publicly traded company with a current market value of $12.9 billion; it has been a member of the Standard & Poor's 500 index since 1999. Moreover, APS is allowed a return on equity of about 8.7% by the Arizona Corporation Commission ("ACC"), its primary regulator.

As such, APS has ample resources to modify its Plan, as requested by the State Forester, in order to be consistent with the Public Interest.[4]

APS Plan Deficiencies

HB 2201 specifies nine criteria that must be addressed in each plan. BPC focuses its comments on two of the criteria. Specifically:

- (a) "A description of areas within the geographic region where the [utility's] facilities may be subject to a heightened risk of wildfire"; and
- (h) "A description of potential participation, if applicable, with state or local wildfire protection efforts."[5]

1. APS Plan Fails to Clearly Identify Areas at Highest Risk and Its Map Conflicts with Other Fire Models

APS labels the Plan as "Comprehensive," both on the title page and at the bottom of each subsequent page. However, the Plan is not comprehensive, to the extent that it fails to clearly identify the utility's powerlines or substations that may be "subject to a heightened risk of wildfire."[6] Other utility-submitted maps do.[7] Nor does the Plan provide any clear identification of the communities that have been identified as having the highest risk.

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[3] *See* §37-1311, "Wildfire mitigation plan: hearing; rules; fees; definitions," at B.

[4] It should be noted that APS first filed a formal wildfire mitigation plan with the ACC sometime in the early 2020s, before such a plan was even required by law. At the time, increased wildfire activity in the western U.S. caused significant financial losses to utility companies (*see, e.g.,* 2018 Camp Fire, 2017 North Bay fires, and 2020 Zogg fire). A massive wave of litigation caused one California-based utility, Pacific Gas & Electric, to file for bankruptcy in 2019. PG&E was also found criminally negligent for manslaughter in connection with the Camp Fire. *See* e.g., "Camp Fire (2018), *Wikipedia*, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Fire_%282018%29. It is very likely these catastrophic fires were one of the primary reasons APS and other utilities strongly supported a controversial negligence standard under the HB 2201 legislation.

[5] *See* §37-1311, "Wildfire mitigation plan: hearing; rules; fees; definitions," at H.2(a) and (h).

[6] *Id.*

[7] *See,* e.g. Mohave, SRP and TEP mitigation plans.

The Plan's solution for identifying high risk areas differs significantly from some of the other mitigation plans that have been submitted to the Department. For example, APS developed its own methodology called a Fire Risk Index. APS divides its service territory into 10X10-mile grids on a map that it says captures "all APS transmission and distribution lines and assets."

That may be true, but in reviewing the APS map, which includes the Village of Oak Creek (the "Village" or "VOC") in the highest risk category,[8] other submitted wildfire mitigation plans[9] suggest the VOC is in a moderate risk area. Perhaps being in a high-risk area is preferred as the APS Plan says the risk index will "thereby drive potential mitigation plans and programs."[10] On the other hand, if the APS modeling is used by home insurance underwriters to determine premiums for homeowners, it could raise rates unnecessarily for VOC residents and in other areas.

Another potential problem we see with the grid solution is that on the map, it appears to simply mimic the Colorado Plateau's extensive Ponderosa forest, a 300-mile tract that runs in a southeasterly direction from the San Francisco peaks to the White Mountains. Also problematic is the fact that it is a monolithic red block of some 160+ 10X10-mile quadrants while the USDA model – while roughly similar – seems to follow the higher terrain and forest canopy, resulting in lower elevations like the VOC to be designated at moderate risk.

As such, we note two different ratings for the VOC, which does not give us confidence which map is more accurate. We think it would be helpful for the final Plan to explain the deviation from models used in other utility mitigation plans that show the VOC area.

Moreover, notwithstanding the large red swath of 10X10-mile squares covering much of APS's northern service territory, we assume that the wildfire risk in each community varies considerably depending on various factors such as surrounding terrain, fuel loading, and population density. These and other factors are listed among the 15 score values used by APS to assess wildfire risk in each quadrant. However, the one score assessment we are most concerned with, since the VOC is literally surrounded by Coconino National Forest, is the lack of multiple evacuation routes.[11] We assume these two factors – relatively dense Piñon-Juniper woodlands surrounding the Village, and the other – limited egress via State Highway 179 –

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[8] The FRI has eight risk categories ranging from the lowest at 1 to 1.5 to the highest at 4.5 to 5. *See* Plan at 12.

[9] The Mohave Electric Cooperative and Navopache Electric Cooperative mitigation plans relay instead on risk modeling generated by the USDA/USFS/Fire Modeling Institute. *See* Navopache plan at 12 for coverage areas indicating the VOC is in a "moderate" area with respect to Wildfire Hazard Potential.

[10] APS Plan at 10. APS explains that the modeling was developed "with input from Fire SMEs (subject matter experts) around the state, publicly available data and institutional knowledge...." Plan at p. 11-12.

[11] The Department should keep in mind the tragedy of the 2018 Camp Fire in northern California in which the Butte County district attorney's investigation determined seven of the 85 total deaths were victims trapped in vehicles. *See* "The Camp Fire Public Report," Butte County District Attorney's Office, June 16, 2020, list of victims, at 11-18. The report also indicated at least one victim was unable to evacuate due to being unable to reach the manual release in her garage in order to open the door after power was shut off. Available at https://www.buttecounty.net/DocumentCenter/View/1881/Camp-Fire-Public-Report---Summary-of-the-Camp-Fire-Investigation-PDF.

would probably come under the calculation for "Community Risk," although it's unclear how APS defines the term.

In any event, we believe communities would be better informed if APS were to disclose the specific scores for quadrants with communities designated at high-risk, and if necessary, a new score labeled "Evacuation Risk". Perhaps the APS included evacuation issues under Community Risk or some other attribute. But if consideration of evacuation routes was not factored in, then this critical factor should also be included. All we can tell from reviewing the Plan is that the VOC's 10X10-square mile area has been folded into APS's FRI calculation without any specific detail other than a generic 4.5 to 5 rating. Perhaps the Department could request APS provide an addendum showing the specific calculations for communities in its service territory.

Finally, we note that in addition to the map in Figure 3,[12] the Plan relies on zip codes to identify counties and certain towns in its territory that are considered to be at "high risk."[13] The VOC is not directly identified, only its zip code, which is linked to Sedona. Perhaps the confusion arises from the fact that while the town of Sedona is in zip code 86336, and the VOC is in zip code 86351, the U.S. Postal Service lumps them together under Sedona. It shouldn't take much effort to list VOC separately on an amended Plan.

Separately, we note that APS also employs a second rating for "current risk," which is used to identify Preparedness levels ("PL) for each of APS's operating districts. This score is calculated weekly. Here the APS Plan also provides an explanation of the data points, most of them objective and measurable, including weekly weather forecasts and a national fire danger rating for public lands. Given that much of the APS service territory and its powerlines cross public lands the latter is a helpful metric. However, we see two problems with this label. First, and most obvious, is who or what is prepared? The nine components primarily list environmental conditions such as fire potential, weather, precipitation outlook and fuel moisture. So we assume the Preparedness Level does not refer to the preparedness of APS personnel, but rather the potential for wildfire risk each week. We ask the Department to have APS clarify what it means by "preparedness." Further, we wonder whether the PL could be expanded to include more granular activities, i.e., that relate to preparedness due to recent fire mitigation activities, the strength of fire crews and equipment, and community participation. For example, Fire Preparedness could include areas where a national forest has recently completed a prescribed burn or vegetation clearing project; an adjustment in the Preparedness Level in a given district when a new firehouse is built or there is a major acquisition of new fire equipment by a county or municipality; and perhaps utilize a metric based in part on a community's involvement, such as approving a bond issue to purchase new fire equipment or by widely engaging in a FireWise USA™ program – a program that is also sponsored by the DFFM. We request that APS provide some level of funding for FireWise programs in their territory.

Given the vagaries of the APS map in identifying heightened risk to smaller communities, the absence of an explanation for how risk metrics are assigned locally, and

[12] Plan at 12.

[13] *Id.* at 8,9.

instead drilling down to a more local, community level so that the public more fully understands and appreciates the scope of wildfire risk in its own community – we urge the Department to take steps to remedy what appear to be disclosure deficiencies in APS's Plan.

To sum up, we recommend that the Department:

1) Consider requiring APS to specify towns and communities, and not just zip codes, where the FRI indicates heightened wildfire risk due to the presence of powerlines;
2) Address and clarify the conflict between different fire risk models that indicate varying levels of risk for the VOC and perhaps other communities;
3) Require APS to disclose its methodology for the FRI in communities like the VOC, and whether ease of evacuation routes was included in the score ratings; and
4) Consider adding other components to the PL score based on local factors or perhaps add these as mitigation factors to the FRI methodology or to other modeling techniques used by APS to develop risk forecasts.

We note that HB 2201 does not require a Plan's policies and procedures for each community to be enumerated in the main body of the Plan but rather allows details to "be included as attachments to the wildfire mitigation plan submission." This could be an acceptable solution, allowing specific information that would help inform local communities of their own unique risks to be included as an addendum to the Plan.[14] These addenda could be organized by subject or by community, but with the latter clearly featured as a user-friendly approach.

2. **APS Plan Overlooks – or Omits – Discussion of Technology-Sharing with First Responders to Enhance Wildfire Suppression**

The Plan provides extensive detail on policies and procedures related to Public Power Safety Shutoffs, and also communication outreach (including flow charts) with various stakeholders. However, we could find no discussion of how it coordinates, communicates, and works with various organizations and communities regarding *wildfire prevention when fire conditions are not elevated* (i.e., non-Red Flag Warnings and Alerts). According to one publication, Red Flag Warnings represent extreme fire-weather conditions but are likely only during a small subset of days, and that wildfires obviously occur year-round, not just on peak warning days.[15]

According to Department reports, Arizona typically experiences between 1,200 to 2,500 wildfires per year, and most are human-caused.[16] Although the Department does not have statistics for utility-caused fires, academic studies suggest 10-15% of wildfire ignitions in high-

[14] 37-1311, "Wildfire mitigation plan: hearing; rules; fees; definitions," at I. "A [utility] may reference procedures and standards that are not specifically enumerated in the [Plan] in lieu of the requirements prescribed in subsection H of this section. Referenced material shall be included as attachments to the wildfire mitigation plan submission."

[15] Chat GPT, citing *Wildfire Today* as its source. Available at https://wildfiretoday.com/. *See* also, "List of Arizona wildfires," *Wikipedia*, inferring that wildfires occur year-round. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Arizona_wildfires.

[16] *See*, e.g., DVVM 2025 Wildland Fire Annual Report, at 6.

risk areas of the western U.S. are linked to electrical infrastructure.[17] We believe greater collaboration between utilities and governmental authorities in the area of *fire prevention*, should be included in the APS and other mitigation plans.

For example, the APS Plan cites the growing use of camera systems, including pan-tilt zoom and artificial intelligence ("AI") camera technologies with 360-degree viewsheds that it uses "to modernize the rapid detection and response to wildfire, preparedness and response."[18] The Plan cites a schedule of installing up to 215 pan-tilt zoom cameras by 2027 and at least 65 AI cameras this year. The Plan also notes that the AI camera technology can, among other things, provide "real-time alerts and images to fire-monitoring professionals, helping them respond quickly and accurately to potential threats."[19]

However, the Plan does not appear to discuss if or how it plans to share this critical technology with First Responders, such as the Department, local fire districts, county emergency managers, and the Forest Service. To state the obvious, timing is critical for both fire suppression efforts in addition to any urgent, immediate need to evacuate residents, particularly those in retirement communities that are scattered across the APS service territory, and with residents who may be physically unable to evacuate as easily as others. We believe that if APS does not have any formal 'real-time' sharing plans with relevant fire prevention authorities, that it would be helpful if these types of policies and sharing procedures were spelled out in the APS mitigation plan. Specifically, APS has committed to installing one AI camera on the new 69kV line currently under construction. We request that APS share this real-time feed with the Forest Service and Sedona Fire.

In addition, we request that APS share the information they have and are developing to help the Community better understand and manage its local fire risks. As an example, they mentioned they have LIDAR data for geographies along their lines. That data can identify with good accuracy the level of fuel on the ground. As part of the California FireWise Programs, that data is available to each owner to see and compare the level of fuel they have on their property and the local Firewise Groups help to manage fuel reduction in high fire risk areas.

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[17] *See*, e.g., Paschal Aniebonam, et al, "Wildfire Risk to Electric Transmission & Distribution Assets: A Comprehensive Analysis of Vulnerability, Mitigation, and Resilience Strategies, *Research Journal in business and Economics*, March 27, 2025, at 94. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395985700_Wildfire_Risk_to_Electric_Transmission_Distribution_Assets_A_Comprehensive_Analysis_of_Vulnerability_Mitigation_and_Resilience_Strategies.

[18] Plan, at 34.

[19] *Id.*

Summary

On behalf of the Big Park Council, I hope this feedback is helpful not only to your Department Program Managers, but also to improving the APS plan in ways that can help enhance wildfire mitigation efforts across Arizona.

I can be contacted at 206.351.2761 or philadeltia@msn.com if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Joe Skidmore
President

cc: Jacob Guadiana, Program Manager, DFFM Wildfire Mitigation Plan
Jeremy Plain, Assistant Program Manager, DFFM Wildfire Mitigation Plan
Nikki Check, Yavapai County Supervisor, District 3
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