

## **Prioritizing Community Tree Risk – Utility Rights of Way**

### **Introduction**

Utility tree pruning programs are necessary to ensure the safe and reliable delivery of vital services and access to public rights of way corridors. However, utility arborists must recognize that community trees and forests are important public assets that add value to property and enhance public health and the quality of life in many ways. New planning tools have been developed to engage utility arborists in the planning process.

Local and regional utility arborists must accept and expand their role in local comprehensive disaster planning, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation efforts. Participation and collaboration within their emergency management community is critical for overall community success.

### **Background**

Trees and the debris accumulated from their destruction is the number one cost to emergency management. Utility companies must maintain public easements to ensure continued utility services, and to protect roads and highways, sidewalks, street and traffic lighting, signage, buildings, pipelines and other rights of way corridors. Currently, utility arborists are not consistently involved in emergency planning, resulting often in less desirable results in risk reduction and management.

### **Discussion**

The Vegetation Risk Management Plan (VRMP) is a tool that can be used by utility companies to help ensure public safety, maintain optimum urban tree canopy, promote tree health, provide for effective emergency and arboricultural management, and decrease emergency management costs. The VRMP focus is on tree risk within a community's transportation and distribution line network using the UTRI GIS analysis. Following the VRMP a community will decrease emergency management costs, reduce the likelihood of damage from trees, reduce tree debris, and reduce the overall impact of major storms on the urban forest. The VRMP is a proactive approach to identifying and mitigating trees that are in need of pruning, removal, or inspection.

Through the VRMP, utility arborists focus "best practice" activities in four primary areas:

1. Collaboration: Utility management collaboration with County/Municipal emergency management to include the utility arborist
2. Tree risk management: Prioritized risk assessment and mitigation focus along distribution line corridors (or highway/street rights-of-way as a surrogate)
3. Risk mitigation planning: Develop a plan to mitigate areas of most vulnerability as a part of a regional Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP). Language in the plan should support the needed mitigation activities to provide safe and reliable service while supporting tree canopy protection and reducing the amount of debris, clean up, and costs to restore service to utility customers.
4. Recovery: Zero tolerance for inappropriate species and sites while continuing to support maximum canopy and ecosystem services

### **Proposed Actions for Planners:**

1. Local and regional utility arborists should be active participants in local comprehensive disaster planning, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation efforts.

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2. Modify & use a VRMP approach as a comprehensive collaboration strategy within the local and regional disaster planning framework
3. Support completion of an Urban Tree Risk Index (UTRI) – Focus resources in the area of greatest risk based on the value of the utility component and the potential for tree failure
4. Follow ANSI A300 Part 9, Tree Risk and the ISA BMP for Tree Risk Assessment
5. As a part of Local/Regional Natural hazard mitigation planning (NHMP) – Seek FEMA provided funds through state EM after a declared event based on identified needs and priorities within your community – can be the mitigation actions identified in the NHMP above such as VRMP and/or even pruning/removing/ assessing/ planting, establishing staging areas for debris, etc.