

THE GREEN PAGES

Power line maintenance can exact heavy toll on mountaintops



By **RUTH HEIL**
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Utilities are at the forefront of the climate-change debate. There's no denying that energy production strains the environment because our demands are enormous. As alternatives such as electric cars become available, pressure on electric utilities to maintain an adequate supply will increase. How we create power is just one concern; how we distribute it is another.

The Lehigh Valley gets its electricity through lines owned by PPL Corp. and its subsidiaries. Federal mandates require PPL to provide reliable service, not just on behalf of its 1.4 million customers, but also for the national grid. Its wires and poles and transformers sit atop right-of-ways that slice through ecologically important habitat when they cross the state's mountains and forests.

Vegetation management is a top expense, and trees present a major risk to utilities. In August 2003, branches along right-of-ways in Ohio knocked out the power there. This cascaded into a blackout for 50 million people in the

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Northeast, Midwest and Canada. Instead of focusing only on the alarm and circuit failures that allowed the outage to spread, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) responded by requiring utilities to remove any vegetation that could possibly touch a critical transmission line.

Citing fear from million-dollar, non-compliance fines, PPL is clear-cutting its way around the additional monitoring and management costs associated with 1,300 miles of its lines.

It's painful to see the effects. In Carbon County, avian biologist Rob

Bergstresser alerted birdwatchers to a recent event near Penn's Peak. As Bergstresser stated, "PPL has completely leveled the brush under the power line as far as I can see." To his knowledge, it was the only county site known to host a Golden-winged Warbler nest — a rare bird that has been considered for endangered-species listing.

As I drove there to investigate, my ears popped from the elevation change. Short, scrubby pines dominated the landscape in keeping with a typical mountaintop environment. When I arrived, I found a 210-foot-wide clear-cut. A few swallows, a moth, a bee, a tick, some grass and the occasional foot-high plant was the only life I could find. Everything else lay in twisted, shredded remains on the ground.

Mountaintops play a crucial role in ecology, but only if they are forested, or at least vegetated. If bare, storms will carry the soil into the streams and rivers below.

What struck me most was there were only a scattering of tree stumps, indicating the area could have been selectively cut. Once awarded a Tree Line City USA designation, PPL determined its historic Selective Vegetation Management approach is now inadequate for high-voltage lines.

FERC does not endorse clear-cutting, but has remained silent when it comes to much-needed rules against the practice. Meanwhile, PPL says it will encourage low-growing vegetation directly under the lines and allow shrubs along the borders. While this is great news, PPL has essentially destroyed what was there to start from scratch. The costly planting will take a generation to grow, and until then, herbicides will be sprayed to control undesirable species.

There are obvious reasons why we need to keep power flowing, but we cannot overlook the economics of a healthy environment. Bird recreation alone attributes more than \$450 million per year to Pennsylvania's economy. A recent study found that, in the state, watchable wildlife recreation supports about 19,000 full- and part-time jobs with wages of more than \$509 million.

Bergstresser and others like Jeffery Larkin, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Department of Biology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, are trying to keep the Golden Wings' population from declining any further. As Larkin explained, power companies "are stewards of our lands, and they have the responsibility to build and manage ROWs in an ecologically responsible manner. Once a species declines to a point that it needs protection under the Federal Endangered Species Act, things get very complicated and costly for everyone."

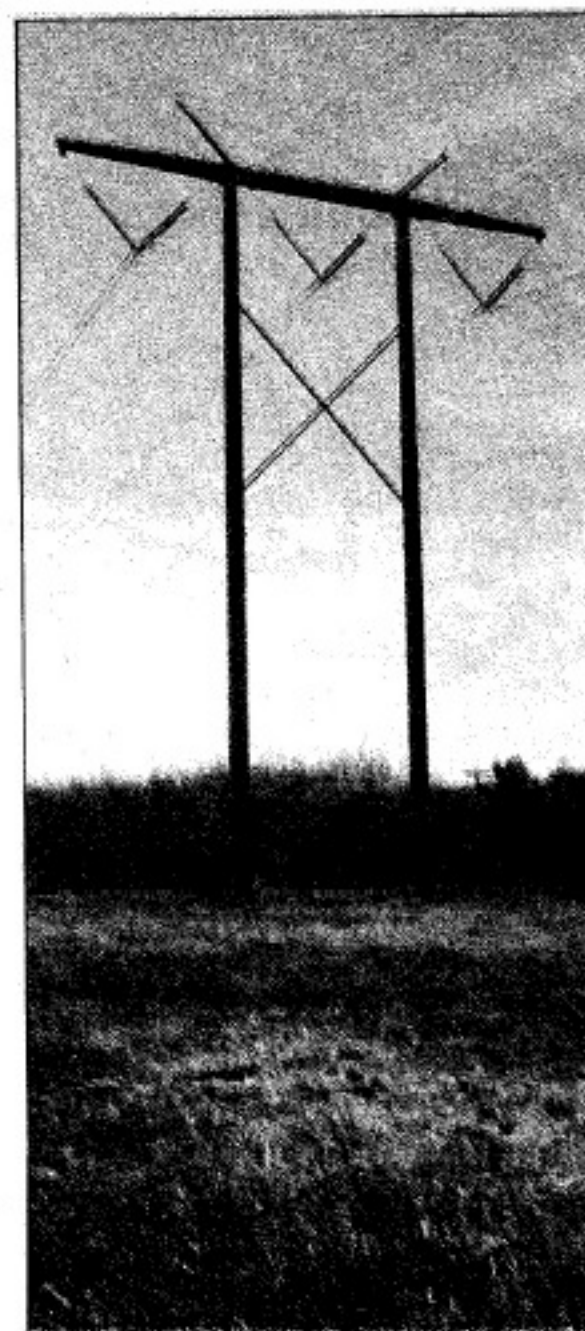


Photo by Ruth Heil

Earlier this year, a 210-foot-wide right-of-way was leveled in Penn Forest Township, Carbon County, for as far as the eye could see.

When asked about the warbler, PPL spokesman Joe Nixon responded, "We always follow regulations dealing with threatened species within our right-of-ways. We survey for these things in advance ... and make adjustments as necessary. If someone has a concern regarding a species in one of the power line right-of-ways, they can call us, and we'll look into it."

As PPL expands its presence here, it is vital that easement details are fully disclosed and that impacted landowners execute their rights. Also, the Pennsylvania Utility Commission must step in with legislation requiring a planned ecological approach.

Meanwhile, ingenuity will solve climate change by granting us independence from bulk power. Entrepreneurs throughout our region are making it possible for us to generate our own supply. Imagine what could happen if corporations like PPL redirected their efforts and financial resources solely toward a locally grown and consumed power system. We'd be off the grid before a tree could fall in the woods.

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