April 25, 2019

Governor Michael J. Dunleavy
3rd Floor, State Capital
PO Box 110001
Juneau, AK 99811

RE: Spruce Bark Beetle Issue

Dear Governor Dunleavy:

On behalf of our 51,000+ members, Matanuska Electric Association, Inc. (MEA) would like to thank you for your inquiry into the hazards brought about by dying and dead spruce trees in our cooperative’s service area. MEA recognizes the present and growing impact of beetle-killed and damaged trees and we continue to hear concerns from our members about the possible impact of these trees on the reliability of their power, especially in the northern stretches of our system.

Due to this concern, MEA reached out to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in October of 2018 requesting the opportunity to participate in their inter-agency spruce bark beetle initiative. MEA continues to participate in the resulting Spruce Bark Beetle Task Force and recently attended a meeting hosted by the DNR in Palmer, on April 9, 2019. The task force, being led by Alison Arians of DNR, Division of Forestry, is a consortium of interested and responsible parties from federal, state, and local government agencies along with community councils and local clearing businesses and firewood providers. MEA has already seen positive results for our members through this collaboration.

While the spruce bark beetle issue is broad and requires a large-scale response, as a member-owned electric cooperative, the Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA) ensures MEA’s interests and resources are focused on mitigating impacts to the reliability and safety of delivering power to our member-owners. MEA also recognizes the risk of wildfire due to high fuel levels from dead and dying vegetation and we have developed a proactive mitigation approach beyond our existing vegetation management plan.

Due to our reliability and safety-related concerns in the impacted areas, in addition to removing hazards within our easements where we have specific and stated clearing rights, MEA has reached out to adjacent landowners to request limited permission to cut hazardous trees outside MEA’s existing rights-of-way if they run the risk of contacting our lines.

The sharing of information by and with the Department of Natural Resources, Department of Fish and Game, Mat-Su Borough, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, and the US Forest Service has already provided significant benefits to MEA. Specifically, MEA is conducting ongoing risk assessments based on data provided by the agencies. By analyzing the historical data of fires and red flag days, then overlaying that data on aerial images of the present beetle-killed trees, MEA is able to focus our efforts on high-risk, high-value areas defined by significant wildfire fuel and heavily populated communities.
Based on this analysis, MEA’s clearing crews are presently targeting spruce beetle killed danger trees along with other trees that could damage our power lines in the Hollywood Road area, from Vine Road westward, and along the Parks Highway between Talkeetna Spur and Parks Mile Post 136. MEA appreciates the Mat-Su Borough, state and federal agencies providing the permissions required to conduct hazard mitigation beyond our contractual rights-of-ways along the Parks Highway. MEA continues to work with individual property owners to seek permission to access private property as we work through the area.

As a part of MEA’s participation in the Spruce Beetle Task Force, 193 private landowners and 59 agency-owned tracts have been contacted seeking the supplemental permission to cut danger trees outside of MEA’s right-of-way. All agencies have provided affirmative permission and comments for MEA to proceed.

In addition to this targeted project, MEA maintains an active Vegetation Management program designed to clear all 4,500 miles of power lines every 6-7 years within our granted easements while respecting the rights of private land owners. As a foundation to this vegetation management program, MEA has adopted some best practices for clearing of right of ways as described below;

- All trees and vegetation 5 inches or less are mulched up to approximately 1.5” X 16” pieces.
- Tree’s larger than 5 inches are topped, limbed, cut into short logs and stacked on the edge of the right of way.
- All limbs and tree tops are mulched up to approximately 1.5” X 16” pieces.
- Danger trees outside of our right-of-way with landowner permission are cut down.
- When possible, MEA employees have one-on-one conversations with members to educate them on proper tree disposal.

The process we have adopted allows for defendable wildfire space around our facilities. This approach can, in certain circumstances, assist local firefighters with defendable space and fire breaks.

MEA also maintains a danger tree hotline for members to call if they have a tree of concern on their property. In 2018, we received 300 clearing requests, visited 315 locations, and removed 910 spruce trees. To date in 2019, the hotline has received 55 calls. As a result, MEA has visited 88 locations and cut down 234 spruce trees.

MEA has significant equipment and an eleven-person in-house staff dedicated to line clearing. Seventy-five percent of this crew’s time has been diverted from traditional right-of-way clearing to address danger trees and the spruce bark beetle concern. Even with this great level of effort, MEA still runs a back-log of sites to complete. In addition, MEA retains four contract crews who actively maintain traditional right-of-way clearing as defined in our Vegetation Management Plan.

In addition to proactive vegetation management, our electrical system also includes risk mitigation investments. Protection devices are located along our powerlines to automatically de-energize any impacted sections of the line if there is a disruption of power.

MEA has also worked to educate and communicate with our members about this issue through opportunities at community councils, our member newsletter and annual meeting presentations, just to name a few.
Despite diligent and proactive efforts by MEA, we are barely making a dent in the spruce bark beetle problem. MEA has invested substantially in critical activities to remove these potential hazards, yet our records reflect that just in the first few months of 2019, we have already documented seventeen outages caused by spruce bark beetle killed trees falling and contacting MEA’s power lines. In our large service territory, trees are dying faster than we can remove them in proximity to our system, even if we were to shift 100% of our efforts to this work. The state has recognized the acute danger these trees represent and closed Byers Lake Campground and other discrete locations to mitigate risk. MEA must continue to provide electrical service over a very large area affected by spruce bark beetles and cannot close off or suspend operations in areas of high risk.

Under the right circumstances, a beetle killed tree falling into our system could cause a fire. Any assistance from the state in addressing and preventing this possibility and the associated operational and economic consequences would be greatly appreciated.

As a participant in the Spruce Beetle Task Force and being an organization on the front lines of risk mitigation, MEA values and appreciates your interest in this initiative. In addition, MEA applauds the state’s commitment, along with other agencies, to coordinate and foster this collaborative initiative. MEA remains committed to participating with all agencies and private landowners on the Spruce Beetle Task Force and continue our focus on removing hazards.

We look forward to meeting with the stakeholders listed in your letter to discuss the topic further. Commissioner Feige has taken the lead on convening the group mentioned in your initial correspondence in the upcoming weeks.

MEA stands ready to protect our members and our system and we look forward to working with this team on proactive and creative solutions to this issue.

Thank you again,

Anthony M. Izzo
Chief Executive Officer

cc: Vern Halter, Mayor, Matanuska Susitna Borough
    Michael Burke, CEO, Matanuska Telephone Association
    Ron Duncan, CEO, General Communications, Inc.
    Monica Goyette, Superintendent, Matanuska-Susitna School District
    Chad Padgett, U.S. Bureau of Land Management
    Doug Vincent-Lang, Commissioner, Department of Fish and Game
    John MacKinnon, Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
    Torrence Saxe, Commissioner, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs
    Corri Feige, Commissioner, Alaska Department of Natural Resources