



## *Utility Vegetation Management*

*by Marilyn Loser*

2012 August 1

The Vegetation Management Resource Center defines UVM as “a broad term that includes tree pruning; brush removal through the use of power saws and mowers; the judicious use of herbicides and tree growth regulators; hazard tree identification and removal; the implementation of strategies to minimize the establishment of incompatible species under and near power lines; and the control of weeds.”

Dozing while I listened to National Public Radio’s Morning Addition, I was startled awake when I heard that NStar, a local utility in Massachusetts, is now “clearing its entire 250-foot right-of-way near high-voltage lines.” I had only a vague notion of what constituted a high-voltage line. In my mind’s eye they’re the huge lines marching across the desert towards southern California. I also had a mental picture of all the trees in my yard being felled leaving short stumps as happened to some folks in Massachusetts.

Where once utility companies only trimmed or topped trees, some companies, such as NStar, are now removing any growth with a mature height of 3 feet in the “wire zone” (directly around and under lines) and with a mature height of 15 feet in the border zone which can be as much as 100 feet on either side of the lines.

Why? Remember the power outage in 2003 that affected 55 million people in the Northeast US and Canada? According to the NPR report, a tree hit a major power line in Ohio contributing to the black out. Since then, Federal regulators established new guidelines. Recent storms, such as the freak one in the eastern US during June, downed many trees leaving more than 4 million households without power. According to Nathan Mitchel of the American Public Power Association Utility, the feds now “have fines that are up to \$1 million a day.”

We want our trees, but we also want air conditioning, lights, cell phones, and computers.

The San Luis Valley isn’t known for its dense forest of tall trees. Nonetheless, I was interested in learning about Xcel’s (our local utility) UVM program so browsed their Colorado website. Much of the posted content was vague, but I did find an online pamphlet with some useful information. It’s “Tree Pruning Near Power Lines”. It has useful guidelines on trimming (such as ALWAYS hire a professional if trimming near power lines) and tree planting.

The pamphlet applies to distribution power lines (“those that typically run along roads and backyards that carry electricity into your home or business”). Clearance requirements depend on line voltage with the highest voltage lines strung further up the pole. Go outside and take a look at a pole.

The lowest line is the pole-to-house line that runs across your yard. These “have the least impact on large-scale power outages, so Xcel Energy does not trim for clearance along these lines, except when hazardous conditions exist,” states the Xcel website.

The highest lines consist of primary wires which “can serve hundreds of customers ... So for reliability and safety reasons, Xcel Energy’s goal is to prevent trees from coming into contact with them,” reports the website.

Under these wires are the secondary wires. Not all branches near these wires need to be removed. As with primary lines, only qualified personnel can prune near these wires. You may have wires under the pole-to-house line that carry cable or telephone connections. Xcel does not trim for clearance around them.

Carefully choosing a tree planting location can eliminate or minimize the need for utility trimming. Xcel encourages planting no trees within 10 feet of the pole-to-house line. Larger tree species should be planted even further away.

The pamphlet suggests: In the vicinity of primary and secondary wires plant only shorter trees (mature height of 25 ft. or less) within 25 ft. of the lines, medium-sized trees (25 – 40 ft. mature height) 25-75 ft. from lines, and taller trees (40 ft. mature height or greater) 50 – 75 ft. from lines. If I strictly followed the suggested distances from lines for taller trees, I would have few places in my yard for a tall tree. Visit the tree lists at [AlamosaTrees.net](http://AlamosaTrees.net) for mature tree sizes.

Transmission lines are those that carry electricity from power plants and between substations over longer distances. There aren’t any in my neighborhood. While short on details (like how wide the right-of-way is), the Xcel website states, “we’ve made it a policy to eventually remove all tall-growing trees and other woody-stemmed vegetation within the rights of way of applicable power lines ... Although there is no guarantee that vegetation can remain in maintained areas (i.e. mowed yards, lawns and public areas), we do attempt to work with landowners to determine if trees and other vegetation deemed compatible with safe operation of the line may remain.”

*“Paper cut – a tree’s last revenge.”* Jerry Reed.