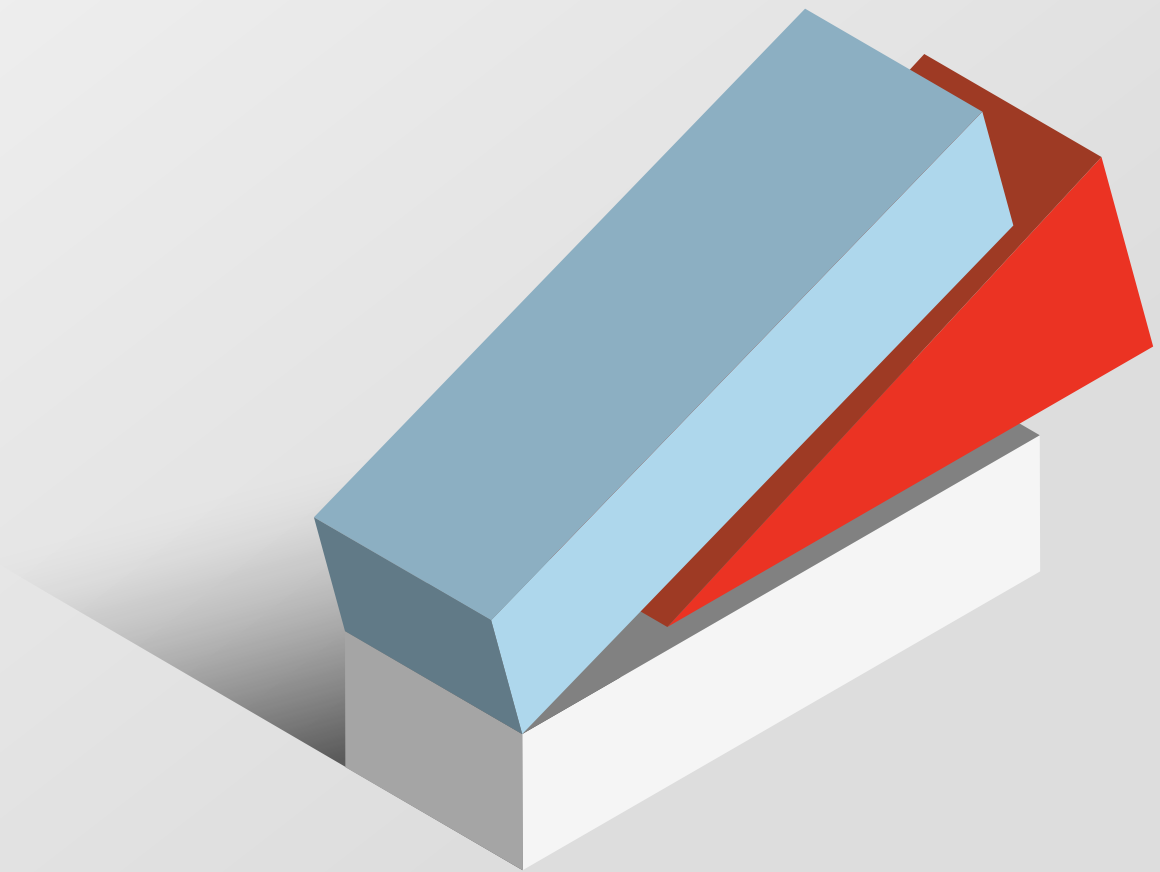




GUIDE

How to optimize your vegetation management program



Managing vegetation and tree growth is one of the most important responsibilities of a utility company. The primary objective of utility vegetation management (UVM) is to keep power lines clear of vegetation to ensure the reliability of the grid and reduce the likelihood of service interruptions, power outages and wildfires.

However, while it often goes unnoticed in the press at large, it is an open secret in the utilities sector that vegetation management is the largest single operations and maintenance expense for most utility companies, with some spending up to \$100 million a year simply on their UVM efforts.

But if you pick up the news, it hardly seems like those costs are making a dent. Power outages and wildfires caused by downed trees or overgrown vegetation continue to occur regularly, and with shocking effect. In the US alone, 10.3 million acres burned as the result of roughly 58,950 wildfire in 2020. And by most accounts, recurring problem areas like California are poised for an even worse year in 2021.



Given the wide range of fallout - from customer dissatisfaction and decreased stock value, right up to massive property damage and human fatalities – an efficient and cost-effective UVM program should be top of mind for utility crew supervisors and foresters. So how do we get there?

First, let's look how current UVM programs are being held back by outdated practices that are often at the root of both extra costs and unnecessary – and often disastrous – consequences.

Scheduled vs. reactive maintenance

There are two general types of UVM programs – planned or scheduled work and reactive work – that have been traditionally used by utility companies to deal with potentially troubling overgrowth along power lines, both not without their problems.

Scheduled maintenance. This type of UVM program follows the cycle of vegetation growth, where pruning and trimming work is planned according to a multi-year cycle and done continuously, with most relying on trim cycles which vary between 4 and 8 years. Unfortunately, these cyclic and repetitive fixed trims are not without a major issue that undercuts its effectiveness: not all vegetation grows at the same rate. This means there are often instances where there is either excessive maintenance along lines that have slow growth of vegetation, or, more problematic for its potential consequences, fast growth with not enough maintenance. Too much or not enough; because of growth rates, scheduled maintenance remains an unoptimized method of vegetation management is both inefficient and potentially dangerous.



Reactive maintenance. This is vegetation management that is done in response to a complaint or concern by a customer, government agency or entity outside the utility company. The clearest example of reactive work is when customer sees that trees are getting close to or into the power lines and that communicates their concern to the utility company. At first glance, reactive maintenance is problematic because it's inefficient: you need to deal with the issue now, on an ad hoc basis, but you haven't planned the routes and staffing, so it is a drain on time and money. At the same time though, it is also indicative of the same problem of scheduled maintenance, that not all vegetation grows at the same rate. You are reacting because you were caught unaware and fell behind the speed of growth.

In the case of either type of UVM program, the overall work continues to be expensive, inefficient, and – reminding ourselves of the sobering statistics surrounding blackouts and wildfires and the damage to life and property – dangerously ineffective.

Don't stay stuck in the past

One of the main reasons for this is that utility companies have been managing vegetation along power lines for decades, and continue to operate according to outdated practices that hamper their ability to do a better job.

We have to look no further than the rather questionable legacy of how much of the UVM work today, whether planned or reactive, still takes place on paper.

The high stakes related to UVM – and the extreme costs when it's not done right – should drive organizations to overcome inertia, abandoning inefficient and outdated practices, especially considering how easily accessible are the digital tools that could start helping utility crew supervisors and foresters this very moment, if need be.

Today's easy-to-use modern technology, including location-enabled mobile apps that leverage workflow automation, can help you conduct proactive vegetation management that frees you from the stranglehold of only choosing either scheduled and/or reactive maintenance, so that you can take stay on top of vegetation grown and better control of your UVM program, increasing its effectiveness and reducing the risk of wildfire and outages.

“ Using leading platforms like Fulcrum, creating custom apps specifically for UVM is easy.

You can create digital checklists around inspection criteria and scheduling, laying the foundation of your program around the custom data that you need to always be up to speed with growth. And, your team can finally ditch the old paper-based system whose inefficiencies are making them fall behind growth patterns.

For example, instead of waiting for a customer or agency to call about dangerous overgrowth, with Fulcrum, your field technicians can document potential problems before they become hazards, and you can view all that data in real time to schedule vegetation management and route teams effectively.

Or, if SOPs change on how to trim growth on a specific site, a cloud-connected tool like Fulcrum means that everyone on your team is always working from the same updated data and nobody is out of the loop on what needs to be done to prevent outages, or worse.

Or, you can quickly and easily upload map layers into Fulcrum, populating your records and checklists with satellite imagery, so you can leverage location data in any way that improves your UVM program, from easily pinpointing high-risk areas easily and to scheduling inspection routes more efficiently.



However you choose to use it to build your UVM program, relying on digital solutions frees you not just from paper, but from the costly, inefficient and potentially dangerous consequences of doing so.

Tools for the future

Modernizing your UVM programs has never been easier and has never had so many easy wins within reach.

With user-friendly platforms like Fulcrum, you can start building a better UVM program right out the box. Utility crew supervisors and foresters will have no problem custom-building the specific apps they need to collect all the critical data that goes into an effective UVM program.

Handily on mobile devices, field teams will have instant access to powerful data collection checklists and tools that can feed intel back to office to continually improve a UVM program and stay on top of growth.

The future of UVM is digital, and switching off paper will optimize your team and your operations, saving you time and money; more than that, digital solutions go a long way to preventing the growth hazards that decimates the environment, destroys property and costs lives.



Want to see how it works?

Try Fulcrum free!

