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Austin Energy's Vegetation Management

Objective

The objective of this audit was to determine the effectiveness of Austin Energy's vegetation management to meet normal and emergency response needs, and how this approach compares to peer entities.

Background

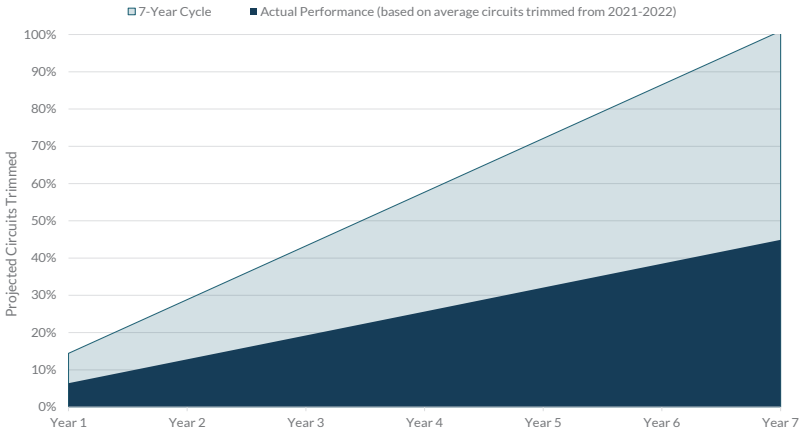
In February 2023, the Council passed a resolution directing the City Auditor to conduct an audit of Austin Energy's (AE) vegetation management program, also known as tree trimming, and its implementation.

AE is responsible for trimming trees near the City's power lines to prevent power outages. The purpose of tree trimming is to prevent tree branches from brushing up against or falling on power lines. AE's current goal is to trim trees on a seven-year cycle with consideration for when a circuit was last trimmed, circuit performance, environmental risk, wildfire risk, and growth patterns.

What We Found

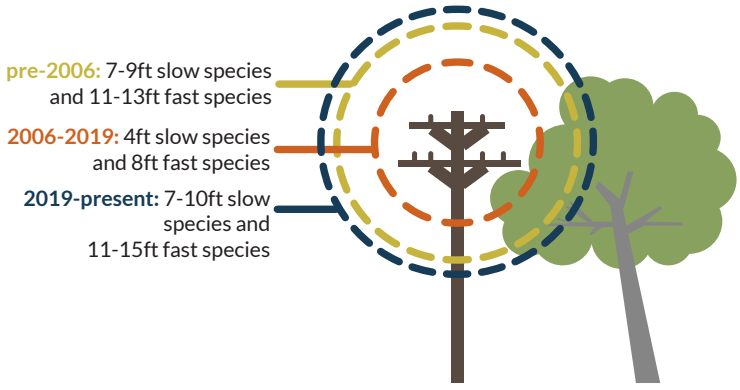
Finding: AE is behind on its current goal to trim trees around the City's power lines on a seven-year cycle because of several factors including Council direction in 2006 to trim trees less than industry standards. However, AE can also do more to develop a long-term maintenance plan of which trees to trim and improve data reliability to assess progress.

Exhibit 1: AE is trimming trees on a cycle more than double their current seven-year cycle goal.



Source: OCA analysis of AE's tree trimming performance based on average circuit trims compared to seven-year trim cycle goal, August 2023.

Exhibit 2: AE's tree trimming clearance guidelines were reduced from 2006 to 2019.



Source: OCA analysis of tree trimming guidelines from 2006 to present, August 2023.

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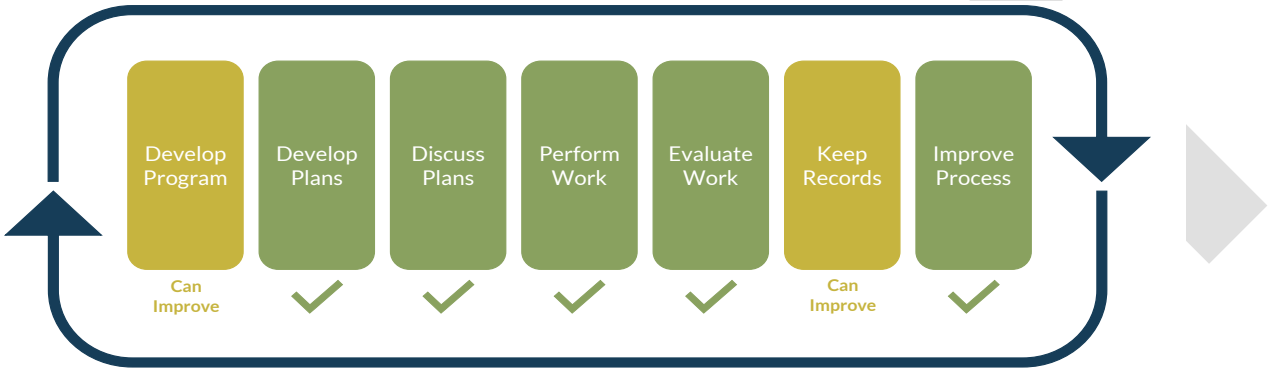
What We Found, Continued

Exhibit 3: AE meets most tree trimming best practices elements and can improve on other elements.



Source: OCA analysis of AE's tree trimming efforts to best practices, August 2023.

- Has implemented most elements of a best practice tree trimming process. This includes developing short-term plans, communicating with stakeholders, scheduling and performing work, and hosting meetings to discuss continuous improvement.
- Does not have a fully developed long-term maintenance plan and goals for distribution lines. This makes it difficult for AE to assess trimming progress across circuits, assess historical information such as timelines to make future estimates, and develop a way forward to meet their current and future trim cycle goals because there is no roadmap to show how to realistically achieve goals.
- Does not always keep complete, accurate, or reliable tree trimming data for program evaluation. We found inconsistencies between the dates on the hardcopy work plan and the dates recorded in AE's tree trimming database. These data issues make it more difficult for AE to do accurate and reliable reporting at an aggregate level to assess overall progress.

Additional Observation: AE has limited ability to hold telecom carriers, such as telephone, internet and phone providers, accountable for trimming trees around telecom wires that are attached to AE's utility poles. If vegetation on telecom wires becomes severe, AE contractors can go out to trim for them, but this is considered an emergency rather than a normal maintenance job. Most peer city utilities do not coordinate with telecom carriers for tree trimming.

What We Recommend

The General Manager of Austin Energy should:

- assign resources to develop a long-term maintenance plan to assess tree trimming performance for distribution lines. This plan should be reviewed annually and used to report tree trimming progress to stakeholders and the public.
- improve how tree trimming data is entered, tracked, reviewed, and assessed to inform planning efforts.

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