

ABQJournal Online » The Aspen Did It

It appears the Las Conchas Fire was caused, more than anything else, by old-school bad luck.

The huge wildfire started when an aspen fell across power lines near the Las Conchas Trailhead, off N.M. 4 between Los Alamos and Jemez Springs, just south of the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

“There was one slot between all the other trees it could have fallen to hit the power line,” said Bob Parmenter, director of science and education at the Valles Caldera National Preserve, of the tree toppled by wind June 26 to spark the blaze.

“Any other angle, and it would have tangled up in other trees,” Parmenter said. “It fell exactly the one place where it would have been able to hit the line. Very unlucky, sad to say.”

Roger Cox, who operates a ranch just adjacent to where the fire began, called the cause of the fire an act of God.

Be that as it may, a New Mexico State Forestry Division investigation is under way to determine whether anyone other than God – or Mother Nature – may be culpable for Las Conchas, which became the biggest fire in state history, charring more than 156,000 acres.

According to the Forestry Division report, the fateful aspen carried electrical current after it fell across two power lines.

Burn patterns where the power lines broke and fell suggest that hot, sparking embers may have shot off the cables “when they grounded out as a result of the aspen tree making contact with both wires simultaneously and allowing electrical current to pass between the wire(s) through the tree stem,” the report states.

The tree was blown over because of rotting at its base, which caused an unstable condition, the report says, adding “the south side of the tree trunk appeared to be the only living portion of the lower tree trunk.”

The report, in its conclusion section, says the fire was the result “of an aspen tree with a weakened trunk, being blown down by wind gusts as high as 41 mph and falling onto nearby power transmission lines.”

Sparks from the arcing lines fell to the forest floor and started small, irregular burns. The aspen’s own bark also ignited as the power wires sparked, and when the tree fell to the forest floor, it caused more burning. The resulting blaze “slowly grew in size” as wind pushed it to the southeast, the report says.

The wildfire that started from the single tree soon became a giant that threatened Los Alamos and destroyed dozen of homes in the Cochiti Canyon area.

So is anyone to blame?

Identified as the “subject/suspect” on the state report is Jemez Mountains Electric Cooperative, which owns the power lines. The co-op is mandated to clear and maintain trees within a 20-foot easement running along the length of its cables.

All sides agree the tree that fell onto the power lines was on private land and at least 50 feet away from the cables.

Co-op general manager Wayne Sowell declined to comment on the investigation last week, but he previously told the Journal – as the fire burned this summer – that his company is diligent about trimming trees along power lines.

“We’ve been very aggressive in implementing a tree-trim program within our easements,” he said. “We trim, and we really clear. We’re spending a lot of money to clear it.”

A U.S. Forest Service spokesman said the investigation is not casting blame on the co-op. The reason the co-op is listed as “subject/suspect,” spokesman Mark Chavez said, is “because the power line is what ignited the fire.”

Co-op billed before

The investigation is ongoing, Chavez said, and it hasn’t been determined yet whether the co-op will be found

liable and charged for the cost of fighting of the wildfire – which would run into millions of dollars.

Jemez Mountains Electric Cooperative has been billed twice before for fires sparked at power lines – in 2008, after the Bear Paw Fire; and in 2010 after the Red Fern Fire.

The Rio Grande Sun recently reported those bills were for \$2.2 million and \$93,000, respectively.

Chavez said the prior bills remain in the claims process.

The cooperative maintains it has no liability.

A statement from Jemez Mountains co-op attorney Kathleen O’Dea says, in part, “(I)t is clear that the Cooperative had no responsibility for this unfortunate incident, nor has the cooperative been cited. The tree that fell into the Cooperative’s right of way, breaking the Cooperative’s power line, was growing on private property and was knocked down by high winds.

“The Cooperative does not have any authority to enter onto private property to remove trees, nor would there have been any reason to remove that particular tree in light of the fact that the tree had a full crown of leaves and appeared healthy.”

Parmenter, who analyzed the downed tree in an ongoing effort to study wildfires, said it was probably around 100 years old, and the rot – typically from fungus – was at the center of the tree.

“I doubt you could see that from the outside,” he said. “There would not be any obvious appearance to it.”

He also noted there are thousands of trees in the area tall enough to take out the power lines if they ever collapsed.

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