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North Shore left with path of destruction

ComEd went too far in its efforts to control plant growth, suburbs say

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At first, Bobbie Moore thought insects must have attacked the sumac along an undeveloped path near her Northfield home, but as she drew close she discovered a wide swath of brittle, dead brush extending miles to the north and south.

"I was thinking it doesn't make sense," said Moore, who called the village with questions. "What I couldn't imagine was the magnitude of it."

Northfield officials were perplexed, too, when Commonwealth Edison Co. contractors showed up with chain saws and announced their intention to wipe out the evergreens, ash, linden, spruce and other trees that serve as the downtown's landscaping.

They learned that the utility company was trying to kill all vegetation and trees beneath its transmission lines, citing state and federal safety requirements. Without notifying any of the communities involved, ComEd workers on June 29 and again on Aug. 12 applied a herbicide called Garlon 3A to low-lying brush on land it owns in Northbrook, Skokie, Glenview, Glencoe, Wilmette and Northfield.

The utility has temporarily halted its activities to explain to angry officials why it failed to notify anyone before applying the herbicide and why it is necessary to chop down Northfield's trees. Area fire chiefs consider the dead vegetation a fire hazard, Northfield Village Manager Stacy Alberts Sigman said.

ComEd officials said they applied herbicide in a 130-foot swath over an estimated 5.6 miles.

ComEd maintains 70,000 miles of power lines throughout northern Illinois, with the high-capacity transmission lines supplying energy beyond the North Shore, said spokesman Jeff Burdick. "If something happened to those lines we could lose power across the whole Chicago area," he said.


The utility, which often takes heat for power outages, needs to clear foliage that can interfere with the lines, cause a safety hazard or block access for repair workers, he said.

But village officials say they didn't learn about the aggressive brush and tree-clearing campaign until



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ComEd workers reached Happ and Willow Roads in downtown Northfield and realized the trees there were too large to kill with chemicals. They stopped by the public works office for information on Aug. 11, Sigman said.

At that point, she walked across the street to see for herself the herbicide's effect beneath and alongside the transmission lines, which at their lowest point are 60 feet high. The utility owns the easement on both sides of a Union Pacific rail line that is no longer being used.

Sigman and others were shocked at what they found. Northfield was most severely affected, as the lines run past residential homes and apartments, businesses, a senior center and several wetlands.

"We are at the epicenter of it because this is where the chain-saw massacre was going to happen," said Northfield Village President Fred Gougler, who complained to the Citizens Utility Board, the consumer advocacy organization created by the state.

Glenview officials who saw the vegetation kill for the first time Thursday were so upset they called a meeting with ComEd that afternoon.

"Why weren't we informed?" asked Glenview spokeswoman Janet Spector Bishop, adding that the herbicide was applied near residential homes. "What did they spray? Is it safe? What is their plan for debris management?"

ComEd had planned to let the dead vegetation rot naturally, Burdick said.

"The goal is to make sure that nothing growing on either side or underneath that would interfere with those lines or cause a safety hazard if those lines came down," said Burdick, who described the property clearing as a routine practice conducted every three to five years.

Garlon 3A is commonly used by other municipalities and has been approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Illinois Department of Agriculture confirmed Garlon 3A, if applied properly, is a legal herbicide.

Burdick said ComEd has never experienced a brush fire beneath its transmission lines. Officials disagreed on whether the utility is required to notify residents before applying the herbicide.

"Typically we do let the municipalities know about this sort of work," Burdick said. "It is my understanding that the [Northfield] village manager may be new to her position, and there may be a gap in knowledge there."

Not so, officials said. Administrators in Northbrook, Wilmette, Skokie, Glenview and Glencoe agreed that they, too, received no advance notification from ComEd.

Sigman has worked in Northfield Village Hall for 11 years, the last three as village manager. This is the first time in at least 20 years ComEd has cleared beneath the power lines, according to the village's Public Works Department.

She is arranging a meeting involving ComEd representatives and leaders from the North Shore communities.

David Kolata, executive director for the Citizen Utilities Board, said ComEd needs to balance community needs and aesthetics with safety and access to the transmission lines.

"At a minimum, it's clear that ComEd's communication with the village was lacking," said Kolata, whose agency is investigating.

Northfield residents consider the pathway a sanctuary for wildlife and native plants.

Philip Preston of Northfield, whose backyard sits adjacent to the ComEd easement, questioned why no one was informed so they could keep children and pets away from the area.

"It was amazing that they could just go in and just blast gallons of this stuff everywhere without anyone's knowledge," he said. Preston, who sells chemistry equipment, said he found mixed reviews about the toxicity of Garlon 3A.

"I understand they clearly have to keep trees away from power lines but there are many alternative methods," Preston said.

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