

Xcel Energy acknowledges “faulty equipment” likely ignited record-breaking Texas Panhandle wildfires

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As wildfires continue to scorch the Panhandle region, Texas electric utility Xcel Energy admitted this week that a downed utility pole near the city of Stinnett likely ignited the devastating Smokehouse Creek fire, which quickly became the largest in the state’s history and has burned more than a million acres.

Since igniting February 26, a cluster of five simultaneous blazes swept across the Panhandle region to the north of Amarillo, resulting in three deaths and the destruction of more than 500 structures, including many homes.

On Thursday, the Texas A&M Forest Service wildfire web site tracker indicated that the blazes, while not fully contained, were largely extinguished. The tracker lists three fires smoldering, down from five recorded the previous day.

The record-breaking Smokehouse Creek fire, the largest fire still blazing, was 74 percent contained, with the Grape Vine Creek fire nearly extinguished at 96 percent. The third fire, Windy Deuce, was 89 percent contained.

On Thursday Xcel Energy released a statement to the media admitting the role its equipment played in setting off the blazes: “Based on currently available information, Xcel Energy acknowledges that its facilities appear to have been involved in an ignition of the Smokehouse Creek fire.”

While admitting its equipment failed, the energy company disputed claims that it acted negligently, and directed residents who have lost property to make claims with Xcel through a “dedicated process.”

Xcel Energy is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and provides electric utility and natural gas delivery to more than 6 million people across eight

states. According to its CEO Bob Frenzel, the company has operated in the Texas Panhandle for more than 100 years through its subsidiary Southwestern Public Service Company based in Amarillo.

Xcel Energy’s acknowledgment comes after news that a Canadian, Texas, resident filed a lawsuit on March 1 against the power company, claiming a faulty electrical utility pole was to blame for the Smokehouse Creek fire which destroyed her home.

Melanie McQuiddy filed the suit against the power company and its subsidiary Southwestern Public Service Company. Also targeted in the lawsuit were Osmose Utility Services, a contractor located in Georgia which inspects logs which are used in manufacturing electrical poles.

The principal claim in the suit alleges that the “companies failed to properly inspect, maintain, and replace a utility pole, which splintered, and snapped off at the base” on February 26, and thus ignited the fire.

Upon news of the lawsuit, the energy giant’s stock price fell 13 percent, a loss of more than \$5 billion. Xcel Energy’s revenue for the year of 2023 was more than \$14 billion, and the company’s market value totals \$28.3 billion, and total assets of more than \$64 billion.

Simultaneous to the lawsuit on March 1, Texas Governor Greg Abbott called for an investigation into the origin of the blazes, stating, “We’re going to continue to work with our local partners to do calls in origin determination.”

Considering the history of collusion between energy conglomerates and the state government in Austin to cover up the disasters brought about by utility companies’ malfeasance, the promise of an investigation is essentially meaningless.

Xcel Energy's acknowledgment of responsibility for setting off the largest inferno in Texas history once again raises significant questions about the condition and operation of the state's power grid.

While the exact circumstances behind what occurred with Xcel's equipment and the legal dimensions of its culpability are not yet established, it is certainly not out of the ordinary for a utility company to abandon the maintenance of its facilities as part of its cost-cutting to increase profits.

In 2019, investigators with the California Public Utilities Commission found that Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) for years concealed knowledge of its decrepit infrastructure. The investigation comprising 700 pages, found that PG&E engaged in a pattern of deliberate neglect for the maintenance of transmission lines and towers, which directly led to the sparking of several deadly wildfires, including the Camp Fire in 2018 that killed 85 people and destroyed the town of Paradise.

As with the Texas 2021 winter snowstorm and cold snap, which led to the loss of power to millions, the Panhandle wildfire catastrophe is the product of corporate greed in a years-long conspiracy with state politicians and energy companies seeking to squeeze every drop of profits from the population.

The state of disrepair of failing electric facilities in California, Texas and across the country is the product of decades of deregulation of energy conglomerates, carried out by both Democrats and Republicans.

The criminal collusion between energy corporations and politicians is exacerbated by capitalist-induced climate change, with scientists predicting that wildfires will increase in frequency across the globe as a consequence of ever-warming temperatures produced by the industrial emission of carbon dioxide.

But the capitalist system, completely impervious to science, is opposed to any effort to address any social problem and the necessary internationally organized response to combat climate change.

The criminal neglect of energy conglomerates and their politician allies is an indictment of capitalism, wherein every aspect of society is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate oligarchy.

The government's criminal response to the Covid-19 pandemic with the abandonment of public health measures and any scientific effort to stop the virus'

spread is governed by the same capitalist principles that sacrifice the health and life of the population for the profit interests of the parasitic financial oligarchy during any social disaster.

The regularity of devastating fires and other natural disasters fueled by climate change combined with the complete abandonment of the population to the catastrophe by the ruling class make it necessary for a socialist reorganization of society, characterized by the mobilization of resources based on human and social need, and not the private profiteering of the financial elite.



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