

Proceeding No.: I.08-11-006
Exhibit No.: _____
Witness: John Hotta

DIRECT TESTIMONY OF

JOHN HOTTA

SAN DIEGO GAS & ELECTRIC COMPANY

(WITCH FIRE)

**BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION
OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA
June 5, 2009**



1 **DIRECT TESTIMONY OF**
2 **JOHN HOTTA**
3 **SAN DIEGO GAS & ELECTRIC COMPANY**

4 Q: Please state your name and title.

5 A: John Hotta. I am a Construction Supervisor in SDG&E's Transmission
6 Construction and Maintenance Department.

7 Q: What are your responsibilities as a Construction Supervisor?

8 A: I direct transmission line crews and sometimes patrolmen in routine and emergency
9 maintenance situations. I also assess and write up maintenance jobs, inspect and assess SDG&E
10 transmission facilities and train SDG&E personnel in SDG&E policies and procedures. I also
11 serve as one of SDG&E's back-up fire coordinators. My detailed qualifications are appended to
12 this testimony.

13 Q: What is the purpose of your testimony in these proceedings?

14 A: I was SDG&E's first responder at the Witch Fire site, and I am testifying regarding
15 the events of October 21, 2007 and my observations regarding the TL637 spans at issue.

16 Q: When did you first learn about the Witch Fire?

17 A: I first learned about the Witch Fire some time during the early afternoon of October
18 21, 2007. Earlier that day, I had been told to report to the area of the Southwest Power Link, near
19 the Harris Fire, but as I was leaving my home in Oceanside to travel there, I got a call from Bret
20 Ball, the Transmission Construction and Maintenance Manager at SDG&E, who told me to head
21 to a fire that had ignited in the Santa Ysabel area instead. That fire has been called the Witch Fire.

22 Q: What did you plan to do when you got to the area of the Witch Fire?

23 A: Once I arrived at the scene, I planned to contact the SDG&E fire coordinator on
24 scene, Brian Crouch, and to locate the Incident Command Post. Once those things had been
25 accomplished, I planned to try to access the TL637 transmission corridor to assess any damages to
26 SDG&E facilities in the area and get crews dispatched as necessary.

27 Q: What did you do after you got the call to report to the Witch Fire area?

28 A: I drove to Santa Ysabel via Highway 76. When I reached the shopping center near
the Santa Ysabel substation (where Don's Market is located), I pulled into the parking lot and

1 contacted Brian Crouch, the SDG&E employee at the Incident Command Post that had been set up
2 in the area. Brian and I talked briefly, and we concluded that I would not be able to get to the
3 Incident Command Post given the direction that the fire was moving. I informed Brian that I
4 intended to try to get into the fire area through the northern entrance to TL637, just south of the
5 Santa Ysabel substation.

6 Q: What did you do then?

7 A: I drove to the northern entrance and went through two right-of-way gates on the
8 access road, proceeding toward the smoke. When I got out of my truck to open the second gate, I
9 realized how extreme the weather conditions in the area were. That area is on a ridge, and the
10 winds were blowing so hard that I actually had to brace myself so I would not get knocked down.
11 I have never been in winds like that. The winds were blowing from east to west, and based on my
12 experience, I would estimate that they were in excess of 70 mph. The second gate is near the
13 spans of TL637 at issue. The pole closest to the second gate would be pole Z416679.

14 Q: At about what time on October 21, 2007 were you at the second gate you have
15 described?

16 A: I can't remember exactly when I arrived at the second gate, but I believe it was
17 around 3:00 p.m. on October 21, 2007.

18 Q: Did you make any observations regarding the TL637 conductors at that time?

19 A: Yes. I noticed as soon as I went through the second gate and saw the spans in the
20 area that the lines were actually being blown out horizontally in a westerly direction. The winds
21 were almost constant at that point, which made the conductors appear to be still but blowing
22 straight out sideways instead of hanging vertically. I did not see any galloping in the lines. The
23 lines would lower a bit after a big gust of wind, but otherwise, they were blowing straight out to
24 the side. I noticed this in all of the spans in the area, not just one span.

25 Q: What did you do after you went through the second gate?

26 A: I continued down the access road that runs next to TL637. As I approached the
27 area near pole Z416676, I saw a fire crew on another access road that heads west at that point. I
28 drove down the other access road and spoke with the Cal Fire employee heading up the crew. He

1 told me that somebody had indicated that there were downed power lines in the area and pointed
2 me towards the spans between poles Z416676 and Z416674. I turned around and went back in
3 that direction. I parked my truck mid-span between poles Z416675 and Z416676 (approximately
4 300 feet south of pole Z416676) so that I could get out and inspect the area for any downed power
5 lines. It seemed to me that the fire had already gone through the area, but I could still see fire in
6 the south. When I was walking around the area, I ran into three individuals driving in a truck.
7 One of them got out of the truck and told me he was the property owner and that this area was
8 where the fire had started. He told me he had heard a loud explosion in the area. Then he got in
9 his truck and drove away. Around that time, I called Grid Operations at SDG&E's Mission
10 facility to request that TL637 be de-energized for the safety of the firefighters in the area and
11 because the fire was still burning under and around the lines in that area.

12 Q: Was TL637 de-energized at that time?

13 A: Yes.

14 Q: What did you do next?

15 A: I drove towards the area of pole Z416674 to see if there were any downed power
16 lines. I confirmed that there were no downed lines in the spans between poles Z416674, Z416675
17 and Z416676. I then attempted to drive to pole Z416674 using the same access road, but I could
18 not get very far because the fire was on the east side of the lines by pole Z416674, and I ran across
19 another fire crew in the area trying to create a fire break. I turned around and headed back to my
20 original parking spot near pole Z416676.

21 Q: What did you do next?

22 A: I contacted Grid Operations to report that I had not found any downed power lines
23 in the area. I then attempted to drive back around to the other access road, which goes to pole
24 Z416673 and poles beyond, to see where the fire had gone. I made it almost to pole Z416670 but
25 at that point, it was starting to get dark and I decided to turn around. I think it was approximately
26 4:30 p.m. at this point, and there is only one road to access the poles, so I had to drive back on the
27 same road to get back to poles Z416675 and Z416676. I went back to my original parking spot

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1 near pole Z416676, got out of my truck and took photographs of the area until it got too dark to do
2 so. I found a rock underneath the lines that I could stand on while I took photographs.

3 Q: Did you make any other observations while you were out there on October 21,
4 2007?

5 A: Yes. I noticed that in the area of the span between poles Z416675 and Z416676,
6 the terrain was burned between TL637 and the access road to the east of TL637, and the terrain
7 east of the access road was not burned. I would estimate that the access road is about 75-100 feet
8 east of the lines. This struck me as odd because, with the winds blowing so hard from east to
9 west, I would have expected that any possible sparking from the power lines would have
10 immediately blown any fire to the west of the lines, not to the east towards the access road. I then
11 noticed fire retardant on both the ground and the wire just south of pole Z416675, where the
12 terrain was burned to the east of the access road. I also noticed as I was taking photographs that
13 the lines seemed to be getting too close to each other as they were blowing in the winds. The lines
14 were de-energized at that point, and I never actually saw them make contact.

15 Q: Were the winds still high at that point?

16 A: Yes, the winds were still blowing very hard, and I had to brace myself when I was
17 taking photographs.

18 Q: What did you do after taking photographs of the area?

19 A: At that point, it was getting dark, so I told the SDG&E crew that had been
20 dispatched to the area to wait in the shopping center near the Santa Ysabel substation (where I had
21 pulled over when I first arrived). I went back out the way I came – via the access road and the two
22 right-of-way gates. That night, the SDG&E crew and I spent the night in the shopping center
23 parking lot so that we could go to the site the next morning. The winds were still blowing so hard
24 that night that one of the Equipment Operations trucks had a window broken from rocks and dirt
25 being lifted off the ground and thrown into the truck.

26 Q: Did you go back to the site on October 22, 2007?

27 A: Yes. I went back with an SDG&E Transmission crew. When I looked at the span
28 between poles Z416675 and Z416676 at that time, I noticed that the top insulator for the conductor

1 on the west side of pole Z416675 appeared to be twisted towards the north (towards pole
2 Z416676). I also noticed that the conductor on the west side of the span between poles Z416675
3 and Z416676 looked too low. I contacted Bret Ball (Transmission Construction Manager) to
4 discuss the issue and suggested we install longer insulators and re-sag the span. He told me not to
5 do any construction work at that time because the area was in a possible area of origin per Cal
6 Fire.

7 Q: What were the winds like when you were at the site on October 22, 2007?

8 A: The winds were still blowing but not nearly as bad as they were on October 21,
9 2007.

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QUALIFICATIONS

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My name is John Hotta. I am employed by San Diego Gas & Electric Company (“SDG&E”) as a Construction Supervisor in the Transmission Construction and Maintenance (“TCM”) group. My business address is 5488 Overland Avenue, San Diego, California, 92123. As a Construction Supervisor, I direct transmission line crews and sometimes patrolmen in routine maintenance and emergency situations. I also assess and write up maintenance jobs, inspect and assess SDG&E transmission facilities and train SDG&E personnel in SDG&E policies and procedures. I also serve as one of SDG&E’s back-up fire coordinators. I have worked at SDG&E since February 1994. Prior to being a Construction Supervisor, I served as a Transmission Lineman, a Transmission Working Foreman for the TCM group, a Contract Administrator for Construction Services, and a Transmission Analyst for Transmission Engineering. From 1987 to 1990, I completed a three-year Lineman apprenticeship at Southern California Edison (“SCE”) and remained at SCE until May 1993 as a Lineman, constructing and maintaining its transmission system. I worked outside construction for ELC Electrical Contractors from May 1993 until February 1994, constructing transmission/distribution lines and substations. I have completed Fire Science courses at Los Angeles Harbor College.