

UNITIL ENERGY SYSTEMS, INC.

**DIRECT TESTIMONY OF
SARA M. SANKOWICH**

New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission

Docket No. 19-____

1 **Q. Please state your name and business address.**

2 A. My name is Sara M. Sankowich. My business address is 6 Liberty Lane West,
3 Hampton, New Hampshire 03842.

4 **Q. What is your position and what are your responsibilities?**

5 A. I am the System Arborist of Unutil Service Corp. Unutil Service provides centralized
6 utility management services to Unutil Corporation's utility operating subsidiaries
7 including its electric subsidiaries Unutil Energy Systems, Inc. ("Unutil Energy" or the
8 "Company") and Fitchburg Gas and Electric Light Company. My primary
9 responsibility is the planning and management of the electric operations vegetation
10 management program for both subsidiaries.

11 **Q. Please describe your business and educational background.**

12 A. I have over 18 years of professional experience in the utility industry with an extensive
13 background in utility vegetation management. I joined Unutil Service Corp. in 2011 as
14 the System Arborist. Prior to joining Unutil Corporation, I was employed for six years
15 at National Grid where I advanced through positions in utility vegetation management.
16 The last position I held with National Grid prior to joining Unutil was that of Manager,
17 Vegetation Management Strategy. Prior to National Grid I held a utility arborist
18 position with Orange & Rockland Utilities, and a position with Northern Indiana Public
19 Service Company as a consultant through Environmental Consultants Inc. I hold a
20 Bachelor of Science degree in Forestry Resource Management from the State
21 University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

22 **Q. Do you have any certifications that qualify you to speak to issues related to**
23 **vegetation management?**

1 A. Yes. I am a Certified Arborist through the International Society of Arboriculture.

2 **Q. Have you previously testified before the New Hampshire Public Utilities**
3 **Commission (“Commission”)?**

4 A. Yes, I have appeared previously before the Commission in multiple reconciliation
5 hearings. I have also supplied expert testimony in other state regulatory proceedings
6 relating to vegetation management.

7 **Q. What is the purpose of your testimony?**

8 A. The purpose of my testimony is to describe the Company’s proposal to increase
9 spending on its Storm Resiliency Program (“SRP”) in 2019 order to complete work that
10 we were unable to finish in 2018, and thereby remain on schedule with the program.
11 Company witness Linda S. McNamara describes how the Company proposes to account
12 for this increased spending through the External Delivery Charge.

13 **Q. Please describe the results of the 2018 Vegetation Management Storm Resiliency**
14 **Program:**

15 A. In 2018, Unitil continued the SRP, targeting the resiliency efforts in communities in the
16 Seacoast area. This program, now through its seventh year, has been very successful.
17 As in previous program years, the 2018 circuits were selected through analysis of tree
18 related reliability performance. The 2018 circuits are shown below in Table 1. In 2018,
19 33.5 miles of critical three phase line were planned for hazard tree removals and
20 ground-to-sky pruning, but only 14.4 miles were mitigated by year end, with 1,875
21 hazard trees removed along these portions of line.

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Table 1

2018 Storm Program Work Details			
Circuit	Scheduled Miles	Completed Miles	# of Removals
E6W1	5.8	5.8	1,103
E6W2	4.9	4.9	375
E23X1	10.1	0*	0
E27X1	4.7	2.3*	205
E27X2	1.4	1.4	192
E7X2	6.6	0*	0
Total	33.5	14.4	1,875

* carry-over

2

3 **Q. Why was the Company unable to complete its planned SRP work in 2018?**

4 A. Even though work planning and hazard tree identification were done on these circuits,
5 work was not able to be completed by year-end. Due to workforce restrictions in the
6 region, bidder interest in the program work was low. After discussing possible
7 alternatives and work schedules with qualified vendors, the Company had no alternative
8 but to choose a vendor that could complete the most amount of work in 2018 and carry
9 some work over into 2019. Those circuits carrying over into 2019 are marked with an
10 asterisk in the table above. For this reason, total expenditures for the SRP program
11 were below the estimated budget with final expenditures totaling \$975,797 which is
12 \$447,203 under the \$1,423,000 budget estimate.

13 **Q. Was the Company able to continue other aspects of the the SRP in 2018?**

14 A. Yes. In 2018, Unutil continued tree growth regulator application, an additional measure
15 to improve the health of the adjacent trees along the overhead electric line corridor.
16 Trees remaining and being pruned were treated with the tree growth regulator chemical

1 in order to reduce the resulting tree growth after pruning and positively affect the tree's
2 health. The Cambistat tree growth regulator treatment creates other plant growth effects
3 that are beneficial for tree health including increased root density, improved drought
4 and heat resistance, and higher tolerance to insects and diseases.¹ 1,000 trees along the
5 2018 SRP corridor were treated with the tree growth regulator.

6 **Q. Do you expect the Company to continue to experience variances in the amounts**
7 **expended on the SRP?**

8 A. Yes. Due to the varying nature of storm resiliency work and traffic control, as well as
9 the ongoing challenge of workforce availability, the Company expects costs may
10 continue to experience minor variances, with final annual costs being slightly above or
11 below the estimated budget. Even with yearly fluctuations, however, the average cost
12 for the SRP program has remained close to the original estimate.

13 **Q. Does the Company continue to see benefits of the SRP program?**

14 A. Yes. The Company experienced an elevated number of major storms in 2018, compared
15 to the absence of major storms in 2016. The largest tree related event was the
16 nor'easter event during March 7-9, 2018. The Company believes that the SRP program
17 contributed significantly to the swift restoration times and shortened duration of the
18 event. It is evident from the most recent results, including the October 2017 wind
19 event, the 2015 Plaistow microburst, the 2014 Thanksgiving storm, and favorable
20 results of the 2012 and 2013 storm resiliency pilot circuits over the last seven years, that
21 the Storm Resiliency work has the ability to and was successful at preventing tree
22 related failures and subsequent electric incidents. This reduction in incidents reduces

¹ 2014 Rainbow Treecare Scientific Advancements, Cambistat Customer Literature

1 damage to the electric infrastructure and the need for crews to respond, which reduces
2 the overall storm costs and expedites the restoration.

3 **Q. What is the Company’s proposal for the SRP in 2019?**

4 A. As described in the “Reliability Program and Vegetation Management Program Annual
5 Report – Fiscal Year 2018” (“2019 VMP Report”) filed in DE 19-042, for 2019, the
6 Company proposes storm resiliency work on 40 miles of line in the Seacoast service
7 area, at a total cost of \$1,690,556. This total is comprised of the \$267,556 required to
8 complete the remaining 9 miles of carry-over work, plus the \$1,423,000 annual
9 expenditure planned for the 31 miles designated for 2019. These planned circuits,
10 shown in Table 2, were chosen for their recent historic reliability performance, number
11 of customers served, field conditions, and location.

12 Table 2

2019 SRP Planned Work Details		
Circuit	Overhead Miles	Scheduled Miles
E27X1	16.1	2.4*
E7X2	19.2	6.6*
E23X1	23.8	10.1
E59X1	15.4	7.3
E11X1	11.9	4.3
E18X1	18.4	9.3
Total		40.0

13
14 The Company believes that there will be no lag in work implementation or reduced
15 workforce issues affecting the SRP program in 2019. I anticipate that crews will

1 transition from completing the 2018 carry-over work to the 2019 work and have the
2 capacity to complete the carry-over plus the normal 2019 SRP amount.

3 **Q. Is it important to stay on schedule with the SRP program?**

4 **A.** Yes. Reviewing the results of the storm hardening initiatives implemented in New
5 Hampshire and Massachusetts, the Company concludes that the reliability effects, the
6 avoided interruptions and costs, the positive public acceptance, and the benefits to
7 customers are significant benefits that more than offset the cost to implement. As
8 demonstrated by the results of the program after a number of significant storm events,
9 we feel this program brings savings to customers through future avoided storm costs,
10 and many additional and important public health and safety benefits. The additional
11 dollar amount we are proposing to carry over will have a negligible bill impact upon
12 customers but will allow the Company to remain on the ten year schedule of the SRP.
13 For this reason, the Company's proposal to add \$267,556 the 2019 SRP expenditures to
14 complete the remaining 9 miles of carry-over work is reasonable and compelling, and
15 should be approved.

16 **Q. Does this conclude your testimony?**

17 **A.** Yes, it does.