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Power lines caused three wildfires, Cal Fire says

**Third suit filed against SDG&E****By J. Harry Jones and Kristina Davis**

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

**November 17, 2007**

State forestry and fire protection investigators yesterday released the official causes of some of the most damaging of the October wildfires in San Diego County.

Cal Fire determined that the Witch Creek, Guejito and Rice Canyon fires – which destroyed nearly 1,350 homes – were started by power lines.

The Poomacha fire began when a house caught fire on the La Jolla Indian Reservation near Palomar Mountain in North County, but the exact cause of that fire remains under investigation.

The causes of the Harris fire near Potrero and the Horno fire on Camp Pendleton have not been determined.

SDG&E spokeswoman Stephanie Donovan said that while the electrical system is maintained under stringent state and federal regulations, power lines can still serve as an ignition point when faced with hurricane-force winds.

“No electrical system can be 100 percent protected from extreme weather,” she said. “There were extreme winds and hot temperatures and low humidity, which together was like a tinder box.

“It was a hazard for everybody, and that includes the electrical system.”

A third lawsuit blaming SDG&E for the fires by not keeping vegetation cleared from power lines as required under state law was filed Thursday.

The suit was brought by Mark and Patricia Payne, Ramona residents who lost their home on Horizon View Drive. It seeks class-action status on behalf of all who suffered losses in the October wildfires.

Two similar suits also blaming the utility were filed Tuesday in San Diego Superior Court. The three suits contend that the utility was negligent because it did not maintain the required vegetation clearance around power lines.

SDG&E said it maintained its system properly and complied with state and federal requirements.

The Witch Creek fire, which began on a ranch about 10 miles east of Ramona, charred nearly 198,000 acres, making it the second largest fire in county history, behind the 2003 Cedar fire.

The Witch Creek fire merged with the Guejito fire, which began near San Pasqual Valley. Witnesses say it was

caused by a power transformer blowing up.

The Rice Canyon fire in Fallbrook burned nearly 9,500 acres.

The Poomacha fire, which burned parts of Palomar Mountain as well as several Indian reservations and parts of Valley Center, scorched more than 49,000 acres and burned 138 homes.

The Harris fire, the fifth largest in county history, burned more than 90,000 acres and destroyed 253 homes.

Cal Fire officials said it cost more than \$66 million to fight the fires.

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■ Staff writer Greg Moran contributed to this report.

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