

STATE OF MICHIGAN
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR THE COUNTY OF SAGINAW

MATTHEW SOVA, JANE SNELL, JAMES
LAMB, SCOTT KUCHAR, ADAM ENGEL,
SAMANTHA ENGEL, and all those
similarly situated in Saginaw County,
Michigan,
Plaintiffs,

Case No.: 25-002533-CH
Honorable Julie Gafkay

**FIRST AMENDED COMPLAINT
JURY DEMANDED**

v.

CONSUMERS ENERGY COMPANY and
ARBORMETRIC SOLUTIONS, LLC,
Defendants

/

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FIRST AMENDED CLASS ACTION COMPLAINT

NOW COME Plaintiffs, by and through counsel, and complain as follows:

1. Providing Michiganders with electric power is privilege and not a license to disregard fundamental property rights.
2. Defendants CONSUMERS ENERGY COMPANY and ARBORMETRICS SOLUTIONS LLC have abused that trust by entering private land without consent, marking non-interfering trees, including the iconic Mighty Maple on Plaintiff's property, with blue dots, and threatening unnecessary and excessive trimming under the guise of routine maintenance.

3. This action seeks to vindicate the principle that utility easements, however necessary, do not exempt Defendants from respecting the sanctity of private property or the trees that enhance it.

4. This case is not a dispute about trimming cycles; it is a dispute about property rights and boundaries.

PARTIES

5. Plaintiff MATTHEW SOVA is an owner of the real property located at 2400 North Hemlock Road, Richland Township, Saginaw County, Michigan (the "Sova Property") who brings this action on behalf of himself and all others similarly situated.

6. Plaintiff JANE SNELL is the trustee of the JANE M BELL TRUST and her trust is the owner of the real property located at 424 North Raucholz Road, Richland Township, Saginaw County, Michigan (the "Snell Property") who brings this action on behalf of herself and all others similarly situated.

7. Plaintiff JAMES LAMB is an owner of the real property located at 3082 South Fordney Road, Fremont Township, Saginaw County, Michigan (the "Lamb Property") who brings this action on behalf of himself and all others similarly situated.

8. Plaintiff SCOTT KUCHAR is an owner of the real property located at 496 Ault Street, Richland Township, Saginaw County, Michigan (the "Kuchar Property") who brings this action on behalf of himself and all others similarly situated.

9. Plaintiffs ADAM ENGEL and SAMANTHA ENGEL are the owners of the real property located at 1734 Lone Road, Thomas Township, Saginaw County, Michigan (the "Engel Property") who brings this action on behalf of themselves and all others similarly situated.

10. Defendant CONSUMERS ENERGY COMPANY (commonly known simply as "Consumers Energy") is a Michigan corporation (which is believed to be a subsidiary of CMS Energy Corporation) that engages in the business of providing electric utility services in Michigan, including in Saginaw County, and maintains overhead power lines adjacent to and/or over properties owned by Plaintiff and putative Class Members.

11. Defendant ARBORMETRICS SOLUTIONS LLC ("ArborMetrics") is a foreign limited liability company and is, upon information and belief, a vegetation management contractor retained by Consumers Energy to perform services related to the trees in Saginaw County.

JURISDICTION

12. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to MCL 600.601, MCL 600.605, and *Dix v American Bankers Life Assurance Co of Florida*, 429 Mich 410; 415 NW2d 206 (1987).

GENERAL ALLEGATIONS

13. Trees are more than just part of the yard for residents and property owners in Saginaw County—they’re what make a home feel like home.

14. For everyday property owners like the families in Shields or the retirees in Freeland and many others across Saginaw County, these trees provide shade on hot summer days, a spot for kids to play, and a bit of beauty that boosts the whole neighborhood.

15. The trees on Plaintiffs’ properties have been there for years, offering aesthetics, wind protection, cool relief, and splashes of greens and autumnal colors in the spring, summer, and fall, without ever getting in the actual way of the power lines.

16. These trees add real value to a home, help keep property worth up, and giving a sense of peace after a long day.

17. Class Members feel the same way about their own trees—whether it’s a sturdy oak for backyard barbecues or a graceful sugar maple standing in their front yard.

18. These aren’t just plants; they’re part of daily life, cleaning the air, holding back soil during rains, and attracting birds that make mornings brighter.

19. Homeowners have spent time and money caring for them, turning ordinary lots into comfortable spots to unwind.

20. But when Defendants trespass uninvited, slap on permanent blue dots, lines, and Xs, and threatened to cut down trees and cut back branches that aren’t even touching or interfering with the power lines, it is a real overstep—turning a simple maintenance job into a threat to an important part of what people love about their homes and properties.

21. This isn’t just one person’s issue with a unique tree; it is hitting neighbors across the county who were served the same notice, worrying about losing healthy trees that do no harm.

22. The “Electric Line Vegetation Clearing Notice” promises to balance safety with tree health, but pushing a blanket 30-foot clearance ignores that many trees, like the Mighty Maple, are already safely out of reach.

23. For regular folks counting on these trees for comfort, protection, aesthetics, and value, it is about protecting what is theirs without the hassle of fighting a big utility alone.

24. Yet, in this tableau of tranquility, Defendants’ incursions threatens to shear away not just branches, but the very essence of what makes these properties pulse with personal pride and pastoral poetry.

25. Trees are unique and irreplaceable.

26. No monetary remedy can completely replicate the decades of natural growth, shade, soil stability, and aesthetic character that trees provide.

27. To excise or eviscerate the tens of thousands of trees in Saginaw County under the pretext of a 30-foot “clearance corridor”—a sterile swath that devours the drama of their distance from dormant lines—is vandalism, not vegetation control.

28. At all relevant times, Defendants have blanketly asserted an easement or right-of-way over or adjacent to Class Members’ private properties for the purpose of maintaining overhead power lines.

29. However, any easement rights, where they even exist at all, are limited to what is “reasonably necessary” to maintain the safety and operability of the lines.

30. Michigan common law requires strict construction of easements with any doubt is resolved in favor of the property owner (servient estate).

31. The burden is on the easement holder (not the property owner) to establish the existence, scope, and precise boundaries of any claimed easement.

32. Even where Consumers Energy does possess written easements, such easements typically authorize only the maintenance of lines and do not grant a right to mark, paint, deface, or impose uniform 15-foot clearances upon non-interfering trees. The easement holder’s rights are limited to what is reasonably necessary under the specific circumstances of the individual property.

33. Defendant CONSUMERS ENERGY has failed to produce any recorded easement granting a right to mark and deface trees with blue bark paint.

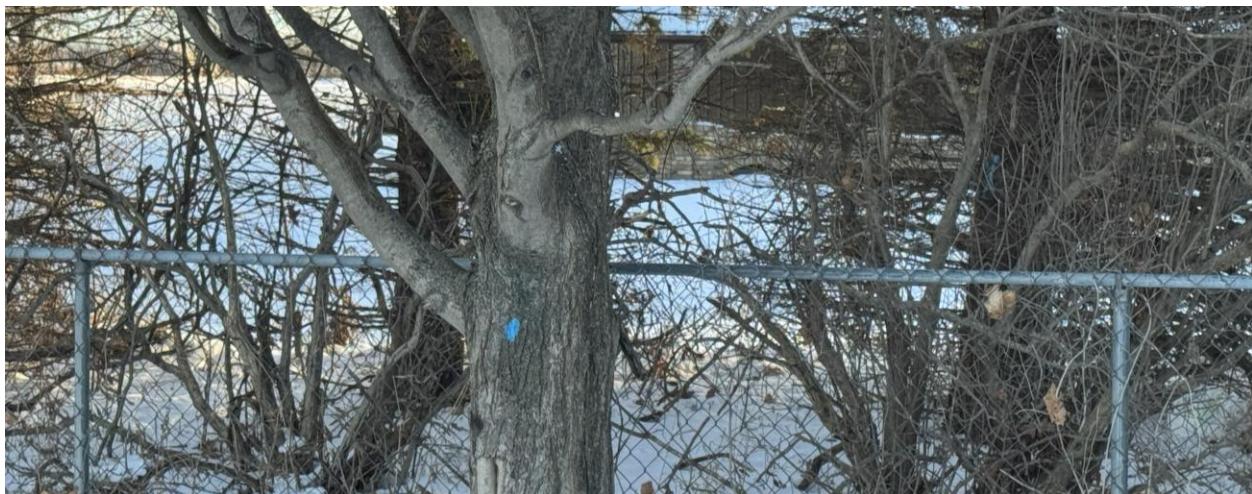
34. However, upon information and belief, any such easement, if it exists, is limited in scope and does not grant Defendants the right to mark, trim, or otherwise interfere with trees like the Mighty Maple and others like it that do not encroach upon or interfere with the easement or power lines.

35. Defendant CONSUMERS ENERGY may not impose a county-wide vegetative clearance regime divorced from the actual location and reach of the conductors, nor may it assert a de facto expansion of a claim of easement width by fiat that does not exist.

36. In October 2025, agents or employees of Defendant ARBORMETRICS, acting at the direction and under the authority of Defendant CONSUMERS ENERGY, entered upon the Property outside any public easement without express consent or permission of property owners.

37. Upon said unauthorized entry, Defendants’ agents affixed blue “bark paint” on decorative and ornamental trees, including the Mighty Maple, across Saginaw County,

constituting defacement, alteration, and an intentional permanent intrusion—



38. The placement of the Marking on trees was not incidental or de minimis; it involved direct physical contact with trees, which is part of the realty and integral to the value, aesthetic, environmental, and emotional significance of the Property.

39. Blue bark paint penetrates the outer bark layer, permanently alters the tree's appearance, reduces market value, and cannot be removed without further damaging the tree.

40. Plaintiffs did not authorize, invite, or consent to Defendants' entry, alteration, and tree defacement on their respective homes and properties.

41. On information and belief, members of the Class did not authorize, invite, or consent to Defendants' entry, alteration, and tree defacement on their homes and properties.

42. One or both Defendants have further notified Class Members of their intent to cut down trees and/or trim branches to create a clearance of 15 feet in both directions from the power lines (the "Proposed Cutting/Trimming").

43. Utility easements in Michigan are strictly construed in favor of the servient estate.

44. A valid easement holder may not enlarge, expand, or alter the scope of an easement beyond that which is reasonably necessary for the original purpose.

45. Marking non-interfering trees and proposing excessive 15-foot clearances exceeds any granted rights.

46. This Proposed Cutting/Trimming is unwarranted, as most trees do not currently or actively interfere with any easement or power lines under normal conditions, and no trimming, as proposed, is necessary for safety or reliability.

47. Many trees are located at measured distances exceeding *reasonable* horizontal and vertical clearances required for safety, do not grow into or immediately near the conductors, and have not caused outages, sparks, or line contact.

48. The Proposed Cutting/Trimming would involve the excessive unauthorized cutting, pruning, or removal of healthy trees, branches, and/or limbs when most pose no actual or active hazard, resulting in irreparable damage to its health, structure, and the overall value of homes and properties.

49. Defendants' actions targeting trees are emblematic of a broader pattern of overreach in Saginaw County, where similar Markings have been placed on non-interfering trees without adequate justification or regard for property owners' rights, affecting numerous property owners in a substantially similar manner.

50. Defendants' actions have effectuated Class Members' disturbance of peace of mind and caused loss of quiet enjoyment of their property and fear and anxiety associated with property invasion and threatened destruction.

51. As a direct and proximate result of Defendants' conduct, Class Members have suffered, and will continue to suffer, damages including, but not limited to, loss of property value, harm to significant trees like the Mighty Maple, and the cost of remediation of the unauthorized and unprivileged defacement of trees with blue bark paint.

CLASS ACTION ALLEGATIONS

52. Plaintiffs bring this action as a class action pursuant to MCR 3.501 on behalf of themselves individually and all others similarly situated in Saginaw County, Michigan, with the claims centered on the protection of non-interfering trees (meaning trees that do not, under ordinary or foreseeable conditions, contact or imminently threaten contact with energized conductors).

53. The proposed Class is defined as: All owners of real property in Saginaw County, Michigan, on whose land Defendants or their agents have affixed blue dots or similar markings to non-interfering trees (i.e., trees that do not encroach upon or threaten power lines or easements) without express consent, and/or who have been notified of proposed tree cutting/trimming exceeding necessary clearances, during the relevant statute of limitations period (the "Class").

54. Excluded from the Class are Defendants, their officers, directors, employees, and immediate family members; any entity in which Defendants have a controlling interest; and the judicial officers assigned to this case and their immediate family members.

55. The Class is so numerous that joinder of all members is impracticable.

56. Upon information and belief, Defendants have placed Markings on non-interfering trees across thousands of properties in Saginaw County as part of a county-wide vegetation management program, affecting a geographically dispersed group of property owners.

57. There are questions of law and fact common to the Class, including but not limited to: (a) whether Defendants' entry onto Class Members' properties to affix Markings to non-interfering trees like the Mighty Maple constitutes trespass; (b) whether the Proposed Cutting/Trimming of such trees exceeds Defendants' legal rights and constitutes trespass; (c) the scope and validity of any asserted easements as they relate to non-interfering trees; (d) whether Defendants' actions are justified under Michigan law; and (e) the appropriate measure of damages and injunctive relief to protect trees like the Mighty Maple.

58. These questions of law and fact predominate over any individualized issues, making classwide resolution superior to individual litigation.

59. Plaintiffs' claims are typical of the claims of the Class.

60. Plaintiffs and all Class Members sustained similar injuries arising from Defendants' uniform course of conduct in entering private properties without consent, affixing Markings to non-interfering trees, and are proposing (or have undertaken) excessive trimming and cutting.

61. Plaintiffs will fairly and adequately protect the interests of the Class.

62. Plaintiffs' interests are aligned with those of the Class, and Plaintiffs have retained counsel experienced in complex litigation and class actions.

63. A class action is superior to other available methods for the fair and efficient adjudication of this controversy, especially given the need for uniform protection of non-interfering trees with individual actions being inefficient and burdensome on the courts, as the common issues predominate over individual ones.

64. Class treatment will allow for uniform resolution of claims, conserve judicial resources, and prevent inconsistent rulings.

65. The Class is ascertainable based on Defendants' records of properties targeted for vegetation management in Saginaw County, with emphasis on those involving non-interfering trees.

COUNT I
TRESPASS
(Placement of Markings on Non-Interfering Trees)

66. Count I incorporates by reference the prior allegations as if fully set forth herein.

67. Trees are part of the realty, and unauthorized physical contact with them constitutes physical invasion of the land.

68. Defendants intentionally entered upon the properties of Class Members without license, invitation, or legal justification which constitutes a trespass.

69. In addition, Defendants intentionally affixed the Markings to non-interfering trees like the Mighty Maple, constituting an unauthorized physical intrusion upon Plaintiff's and Class Members' tree(s) upon their real property.

70. Such entry and later affixation were not privileged by any easement, statute, or common-law right, as the trees do not interfere with any easement or power lines; to the extent any easement exists, the actions exceeded its scope by involving unnecessary and invasive alterations to non-hazardous trees.

71. Defendants' conduct constitutes trespass to land under Michigan common law.

72. As a direct and proximate result of this trespass, Plaintiffs and Class Members have suffered damages in an amount to be determined at trial.

COUNT II
TRESPASS
(Proposed Trimming of Non-Interfering Trees)

73. Count II incorporates by reference the prior allegations as if fully set forth herein.

74. Defendants threaten and intend to enter upon the properties of Plaintiffs and Class Members without license, invitation, or legal justification to perform the Proposed Cutting/Trimming on non-interfering trees, which would involve the cutting, pruning, or removal of tree branches that do not interfere with or endanger the power lines or easements.

75. The Proposed Cutting/Trimming is excessive and unnecessary, as no clearance is required for trees like the Mighty Maple that do not pose any active or current risk of contact.

76. Any assertion of a 30-foot total easement or 15-foot clearance is unsubstantiated and exceeds Defendants' legal rights when applied to non-interfering trees.

77. This threatened entry and cutting would constitute a future and ongoing trespass to land under Michigan common law, causing irreparable harm to trees like the Mighty Maple and property owners cannot be adequately compensated by monetary damages alone.

78. Once a mature tree is cut or crowned, the injury is permanent and cannot be restored through monetary damages.

79. Moreover, once limbs are cut, growth patterns, structural integrity, and aesthetic form are permanently altered, it cannot be undone.

80. Plaintiffs and Class Members are entitled to injunctive relief to prevent this trespass and protect non-interfering trees, as the balance of equities favors preservation of the status quo and property rights.

81. As a direct and proximate result of this trespass, Plaintiffs and Class Members have suffered damages in an amount to be determined at trial.

COUNT III
WRONGFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PROPERTY RIGHTS

82. Count III incorporates by reference the prior allegations as if fully set forth herein.

83. Plaintiffs and Class Members hold the exclusive right to possess, use, enjoy, and control their respective real property owned in Saginaw County, including the right to determine whether, when, and how anyone may enter upon their land or alter natural features such as decorative, ornamental, and mature trees.

84. Defendants, acting jointly and severally, intentionally and without lawful authority interfered with these property rights by entering upon land outside any easement, marking non-interfering trees with permanent blue bark paint, threatening to remove or excessively cut-back healthy trees, and otherwise asserting dominion and control over natural features integral to the value, aesthetics, environmental function, and personal significance of the properties.

85. Such conduct unlawfully interfered with the quiet enjoyment, use, and control of their property, and caused substantial annoyance, aesthetic degradation, disruption of peace of mind, and dignitary harms, including fear of imminent tree destruction, loss of tranquility, and unwanted alteration of cherished trees and landscape features.

86. Defendants' interference was intentional, unnecessary, excessive, and undertaken with reckless disregard for the rights of property owners. Defendants neither sought nor obtained consent before imposing markings and directives concerning trees that did not pose any present or actual hazard.

87. As a result of Defendants' wrongful interference with property rights, Plaintiffs and Class Members suffered damages.

COUNT IV STATUTORY TRESPASS TO TREES – MCL 600.2919(1)(a)

88. Count IV incorporates by reference the prior allegations as if fully set forth herein.

89. Michigan law provides that a person who "otherwise injures" any tree on the land of another, without lawful authority, is liable for treble damages. MCL 600.2919(1)(a).

90. Defendants, acting without license, privilege, or lawful justification, entered upon the properties of Plaintiff and Class Members and injured their trees within the meaning of the statute by applying permanent blue bark paint, affixing markings that penetrate and stain the bark, degrading the aesthetic and appraised value of the trees, and altering the trees' natural appearance and condition.

91. Painting a tree with permanent bark paint constitutes an "injury" to the tree within the meaning of MCL 600.2919.

92. The statutory phrase 'otherwise injures' is broad and captures any act that reduces the value, condition, appearance, or long-term health of a tree.

93. Injury to trees under MCL 600.2919(1)(a) includes any act that mars, scars, stains, disfigures, or diminishes the structural, aesthetic, or economic value of the tree.

94. Unnatural blue bark paint constitutes such an injury.

95. Such bark paint does not self-remove nor can be removed without additional manipulation that itself risks bark damage or long-term harm to the tree's look, natural structure, and biological integrity.

96. The Markings reduce the trees' value, damage the tree's cosmetic and ornamental qualities, and create a permanent or long-term scar.

97. In addition, Defendants' announced plan to cut, trim, or remove healthy non-interfering trees constitutes a threatened statutory injury.

98. Defendants have marked trees with blue dots, Xs, slashes, and symbols indicating intended cutting or removal, despite those trees not sufficiently encroaching on any easement or electrical facility.

99. Such threatened actions fall squarely within the scope of potential statutory liability under MCL 600.2919(1)(a).

100. Defendants' acts were intentional and performed with knowledge that they lacked consent and lacked any legal right to alter, mark, or damage trees that do not interfere with power lines or easements.

101. Defendants' acts were willful and not casual and involuntary.

102. As a direct and proximate result of Defendants' statutory trespass to trees, Plaintiffs and Class Members have suffered damages and are also entitled to treble damages as expressly provided by MCL 600.2919(1)(a).

103. Plaintiffs and Class Members additionally seek all available exemplary damages and any further relief necessary to protect, restore, and preserve their trees and property.

JURY DEMANDED

104. A jury is demanded for all triable issues.

RELIEF REQUESTED

105. WHEREFORE, Plaintiffs, individually and on behalf of the Class, requests this Court to enter as follows:

- a. Certify this action as a class action pursuant to MCR 3.501 and appoint Plaintiffs' counsel as Class Counsel;

- b. Award actual damages (joint and severally, if applicable) as proven at trial (including mental anguish, as well as the cost of remediation and removal of blue bark paint from all affected trees or replacement if paint cannot be removed) and/or nominal damages of at least one hundred dollars (\$100.00) for each trespass;
- c. Award exemplary damages for Defendants' malicious, reckless, or indifferent acts as part of their trespasses, to compensate for humiliation, indignity, disruption of peace, and injury caused by Defendants' unlawful conduct;
- d. Declare that tree marking with bark paint, regardless of whether the tree is within and outside the public right-of-way is outside the scope of any easement had or enjoyed by Defendants;
- e. Declare that Defendants bear the burden of proving the existence, validity, and scope of any claimed easement before performing vegetation management on private property;
- f. Declare that a 15-foot clearance applied to non-interfering trees is outside the scope of any easement held or enjoyed by Defendants.
- g. Issue a preliminary and/or permanent injunction enjoining Defendants from performing the Proposed Cutting/Trimming or any further entry upon the Property or Class Members' properties to affect non-interfering trees like the Mighty Maple without written consent;
- h. Award costs, expenses, and/or attorney fees as allowed by law; and
- i. Grant any further relief as the Court deems just and proper, with specific emphasis on the protection and preservation of the Mighty Maple and similar non-interfering trees.

Date: December 11, 2025

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

/s/ Philip L. Ellison

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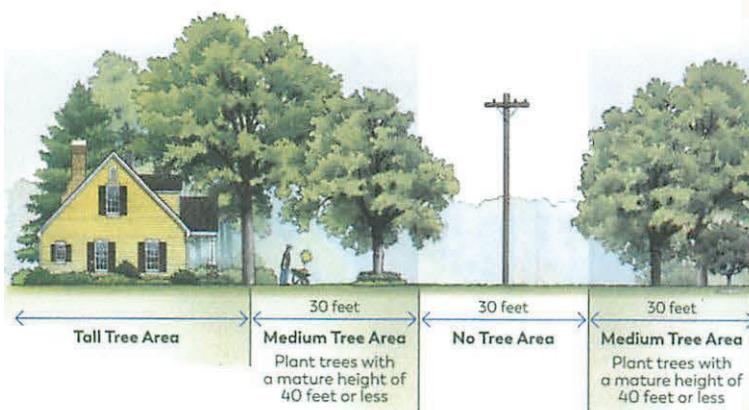
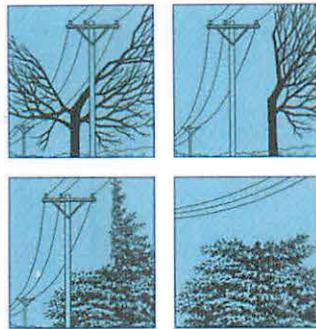
We Will Be Working On or Around Your Property Soon.

Examples

Here are some examples of work that may occur to trees on and near your property.

A tree may be removed because it's under or too close to a line, dead, dying, damaged or at risk of falling.

Bottom line: clearing trees and limbs near electric lines keeps electric service safe and reliable.



To help communities better understand tree clearances around power lines, Consumers Energy provides tree planting tips, photo examples of tree trimming, descriptions of vegetation management methods, minimum power line clearances as well as a section on trees and safety at: ConsumersEnergy.com/forestry.

In the event of downed wires, gas emergency or security concerns, call Consumers Energy at 800-477-5050.

For more information on the National Arbor Day Foundation's Right Tree, Right Place concept visit ArborDay.org.

Electric Line Vegetation Clearing Notice

See Inside For Details

Electric Line Vegetation Clearing Notice

We strive to provide safe, reliable electric service to our customers while making a sincere effort to minimize the risk to the health of trees and shrubs in the communities we serve.

What to Expect

In order for us to continue providing safe and reliable electricity to you, we need to do some work on your property.

The option(s) selected by a mark on the list to the right indicate the line clearing work planned on your property.

If you have questions
or concerns, please call:

Johnnie Barney
(989) 980 6458
ArborMetrics

Refer to Location: [REDACTED]

What We Are Planning to Do

Trim trees (limbs). The amount of clearance needed from the lines varies based on the voltage of the line and species of tree(s). Trees to be trimmed on your property are marked with a **blue dot (•)**

- Cut trees on your property that are interfering, or may interfere, with area electric lines. Stumps will remain and will be treated with an approved herbicide to prevent regrowth. Trees to be cut on your property are marked with a **blue (x)**
- Cut tree(s) on your property that are not in the right-of-way but are diseased, damaged, dead or dying that pose a hazard to area electric lines. Tree(s) are marked with a **blue (A)** and will be cut at no cost to you
- Cut saplings (brush) on your property that are interfering, or may interfere, with electric lines or prevent access to the lines. Stumps will remain and will be treated with an approved herbicide to prevent regrowth. Brush may be marked with a **blue slash (/)**
- Mow brush. Herbicide to prevent regrowth will be applied at a later date
- Cut vine growing on/at pole and apply herbicide to stump
- Use heavy mechanical clearing equipment on your property
- Herbicide will be used on your property to control vegetation
- Perform significant line clearing work on your property.
Please call us for details

Handling of Wood Debris

- Brush chipped and hauled, wood cut and left on site
- Brush chipped and chips scattered in right-of-way, wood cut and left on site
- Mechanical brush mower, shredded debris remains on site
- Brush cut and piled along right of way, wood cut and left onsite