

Surge victims sick of the runaround

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The Citizen

Friday, August 14, 2009

Carla Boe admits that in her past she was a bit of a community activist.

Since her move to the rural Skutz Falls area southwest of Lake Cowichan last year, however, she said she's hung up her noisemakers in favour of a more quiet lifestyle near the lake.

That was until June 30 when the small town and its even smaller outlying areas received an extra jolt of electricity thanks to a power surge through BC Hydro's lines.

The surge occurred when a contractor for BC Transmission Corporation was clearing vegetation along transmission lines, which resulted in a fir tree falling on the lines, which in turn came in contact with distribution lines underneath, sending a high-voltage surge into several homes in the area. In all, the surge affected about 260 customers, according to BC Hydro, knocking out various electronic items in multiple homes.

Hydro handled the initial claims and complaints, but all claims are ultimately the responsibility of the contractor's insurer.

Boe said she went to the community meeting held on July 30 and coolly watched as the two Hydro representatives there were "bombarded with anger."

"Frankly, I was calm to begin with but the anger grew," she admitted. "They were placating us and talking about processes and that BC Hydro kept saying they were not responsible, that it was this other company that did it but that BC Hydro will kindly give us up to \$1,000."

That money is not a settlement, said BC Hydro Spokesman Ted Olynyk on Wednesday.

"It's our way of just trying to help our customers," he said of the offer.



CREDIT: Lexi Baines, Citizen

Carla Boe shows off the nearly-new dryer that required an expensive repair job after the power surge. She doesn't know why the washer below it was unaffected but, given the trouble she's had claiming for the cost of the damage, she's glad it escaped.

He said there is nothing new to report on Hydro's end and the company maintains it is not at fault.

"I don't mean to sound like I'm ducking it, we just think that there are other people that are responsible for the events."

Boe said somebody has got to foot the bill for her repair and replacement costs, which already exceed \$2,500.

"Generally speaking, the damages have been enormous," she said, noting that she had a six-outlet adapter plugged in, which powered a toaster, a coffee maker and a coffee grinder.

"Not to put a pun on it," she said, "but the toaster got toasted." That was just the tip of the damage at Boe's house.

It cost her \$400 to repair only the damaged electronics in her clothes dryer. She said she's not alone.

"People at the meeting spoke of computers, of fridges, of television sets. Hydro is saying well, your insurance can cover it."

Boe has talked with her lawyer.

"He said it's probably going to take a class-action suit. Well, that takes forever in the courts and you've got to have deep pockets to do it," she said.

Though the fault may not rest squarely on the shoulders of BC Hydro, Boe has no problem blaming the company.

"BC Hydro is ultimately responsible," she said. "It doesn't matter if it's another company that did it. BC Hydro is ultimately responsible and they should just be responsible and pay up."

Neighbour Keith Christie, who operates Charter Creek Nursery at the corner of Skutz Falls and Cowichan Lake Roads, said Thursday that he was extraordinarily fortunate the problem didn't occur a little later.

He was able to find the phone number of the supplier of the pump that keeps his irrigation system going and then drive to their location, arriving five minutes before closing time just before a long weekend. They had one pump in stock which he snapped up.

The cost if he'd not been as lucky? More than \$10,000 and possibly as high as \$100,000, he said.

"It was the hottest weekend of the year."

Besides his pump, the boneyard on Christie's deck also includes a couple of ruined microwave ovens, a breadmaker, a TV and the power bar that controlled his son's entertainment system.

Former CVRD Director Joe Allan has documented his personal ordeal on his blog at www.joeallan.com

He wrote to BC Hydro but their response was to refer all requests for compensation to the contractor's insurance adjuster.

The adjuster's response was frustrating to Allan.

"Our investigation into the loss is still under way and we are not in a position to accept any liability for losses due to the power surge on the 30th. We would suggest that you report the claim to your own insurance company," wrote David Guyader of Cunningham Lindsey Canada.

The reply prompted Allan to join other area residents and turn to his old colleagues at the CVRD.

One letter has already been sent and the Cowichan Valley Regional District Board is continuing to stick up for its constituents.

But even pressure from local government has not brought satisfaction.

"There's been some back and forth with the power surge issue," said Electoral Area F (Cowichan Lake South/ Skutz Falls) Director Ian Morrison. "The progress to this point has been very slow and very fractured and quite unsatisfactory to the residents affected and I would like to ask for the continued support of our local government in the matter being resolved in a timely and fair fashion and it doesn't appear to be going that way at this point."

Morrison asked the Directors to allow Board Chair Gerry Giles to write a letter to the BC Utilities Commission expressing their dissatisfaction with the way things are being handled.

North Cowichan Mayor Tom Walker wondered why the letter wouldn't be written to BC Hydro.

"It's apparent that BC Hydro is referring (the problem) to the BC Utilities Commission. Perhaps they can provide some direction to BC Hydro," said Morrison.

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