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Buried powerlines questioned

Study continues on benefit of underground lines

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TALLAHASSEE — Florida utilities are better prepared for hurricanes than they were three years ago, but the jury is still out on putting power lines underground, a University of Florida researcher concludes.

“We were surprised about how little is known,” said Mark Jamison, director of the Public Utility Research Center in Gainesville. “All the studies are projections, but nobody has really followed up to see if these projections are true.”

Jamison’s comments come on the heels of a report released Monday by the Public Service Commission that details stricter storm hardening standards and continuing research on burying power lines.

It mentions a study commissioned last year that looked at the amount of research already done and concluded there is not enough evidence to suggest burying all power lines would be cost effective.

“Without consideration of aesthetics, no study reviewed concludes that wholesale conversion of overhead electric distribution lines to underground can be fully cost justified,” the report said.

Jamison said the commission and utilities are awaiting results of the next phase of the plan, a study of Florida’s experience with underground power lines that is due next month. The research center is financed by the industry and state regulators.

In March, the commission gave Florida Power & Light permission to pay 25 percent of a city’s cost of converting overhead lines to underground and pass that cost on to its entire pool of customers.

Commissioners reasoned customers in other areas could benefit from the utility’s maintenance savings and better ability to respond to downed power lines elsewhere after a storm.

“There is a good case to be made that FPL’s entire rate base could benefit,” said Public Service Commission spokesman Anthony De Luise.

But the pilot program expires in October 2008 when regulators will have more information, De Luise said.

FPL is working with the town of Jupiter Island on an approximately \$10 million conversion project, but it’s too early to say how much customers eventually will have to pay.

The Municipal Underground Utilities Consortium doesn’t dispute the findings of the initial study about cost effectiveness to utilities, but said it fails to look at the enormous economic costs of lost power that could be avoided.

The group is made up of cities promoting underground lines, including Titusville, Cocoa Beach, Satellite Beach, Melbourne and Rockledge in Brevard County; and Bonita Springs, Naples and Punta Gorda in Southwest Florida.