

EXTENSION CORD BLAMED FOR FIRE

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A faulty Christmas tree extension cord that had been altered by state workers has been blamed for the fire that nearly gutted the Governor's Mansion.

On Nov. 30, a crew from the state Division of Facilities Construction and Management removed a defective switch from the cord encircling the tree and improperly spliced the exposed wires back together. The splice was then covered with electrical tape. Heat generated by electrical resistance at the spot of the fused wires started Wednesday's blaze, said state Fire Marshal Lynn Borg.

``According to the National Electrical Code, the splice should have been made with wire nuts or with mechanical crimpers," Borg said. ``That prevents the wires from loosening up and creating more resistance - and more heat."

Smoke and fire caused an estimated \$1.7 million in damage to the 91-year-old landmark.

The repair was approved by a DFCM manager ``with a background in low-voltage electrical systems," said Neal Stowe, director of the department.

``The decision to splice the wires was made when the lights failed to work because the switch had overheated," he said. ``The manager reviewed the situation with the balance of the (maintenance) team, and it was agreed to go ahead with the repair."

Stowe declined to identify the manager.

The blaze may have been avoided if workers had used a heavier extension cord to facilitate the large volume of electricity needed to light the 25-foot tree.

The cord was 18-gauge wire that was rated to carry 6 amps of current. Lights on the tree connected to the cord were estimated to be using at least 8.8 amps of electricity - enough of a difference to cause heating in the wires, said Gary Whitney, Department of Public Safety spokesman.

At the request of Gov. Mike Leavitt, the division is preparing a report to review the cause of the fire. Steps to avoid future mishaps will also be studied.

“We've interviewed anyone involved in the fire to learn more,” said Stowe.