

Electric malfunction kills horse, cattle

Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

A Wallowa County couple lost two cows, a horse and nearly their lives because of a downed wire that electrified a stock fence. Gary and Pennie Rials of Troy knew something was wrong when they noted two cows laying down near the fence while one of the cows gave off billowing clouds of smoke where it touched the fence. The couple called their power company, Clearwater Power, to start the ball rolling on repairing the accident.

"Had that not happened, we would have gone through that gate and killed us," Pennie Rials said. About five hours after the initial call, employees of Clearwater electric arrived on the scene and according to the Rials, "just stood there." The employees said they needed to talk to their boss.

The road itself was "hot," as the couple's dogs discovered when they took a ride to the area in a farm vehicle. The dogs started a mad dance as soon as their feet touched the ground.

"Somebody could have been killed," Penny Rials said. "They don't care."

Before leaving, the men told the couple they would return on Monday. The employees returned at 2 p.m. on the following week. They left 10 minutes later saying the problem was not theirs, but rather, the Rials. They refused to offer any assistance when Gary Rials asked for help to take the riser (vertical conduit) down. The crew eventually disconnected the power to the weather head on property.

Rials, who formerly worked as a "trouble man" for Sierra Pacific (now NV Energy) in Nevada, got his tool bag and went to work, finding the problem within several minutes. He said it was his opinion that the Clearwater crew suffered from inexperience and didn't seem to know what to look for.

In his former profession, Rials said the place would have been crawling with supervisors and not a single one has shown to date. No



Courtesy photo/Pennie Rials

These two cows belonging to Gary and Pennie Rials of Troy were electrocuted after the fence became electrified. Even though the fence became "hot" due to a malfunction on the Rials' property, they said it took two days after their initial call for Clearwater Power to shut off the power from the company's end to the hot spot. A horse died as well.

one from the company has explained why the problem didn't trip the company's fuse or operate the recloser, a high-powered electrical switch that cuts electricity in the event of a similar situation.

Gary Rials said the lack of concern on the part of the employees concerned him, as well as the recloser/fuse failures, which he said were probably set too high.

"If I hadn't seen a cow smoking on the fence, I would have opened that gate and been dead than a doornail," he said. Rials also noted that anyone walking in the area, whether child or adult could have unknowingly touched the fence and been electrocuted. No one from Clearwater had contacted the couple.

Bob Pierce, manager of member services for Clearwater, disputed the couple's

accusations. He said that Clearwater sent out a crew within six minutes of receiving the initial call.

"Other than travel time, it was virtually an immediate

response," he said. Pierce added that the crew immediately disconnected the power to the Rials' property in an attempt to mitigate the damage and for safety purposes.

'IF I HADN'T SEEN A COW SMOKING ON THE FENCE, I WOULD HAVE OPENED THAT GATE AND BEEN DEADER THAN A DOORNAIL!'

Gary Rials

'WE'RE TAKING IT VERY SERIOUSLY AND DOING A FULL WRITE-UP ON IT. I DO KNOW A LINEMAN WOULD NEVER LEAVE A SCENE THAT WASN'T SAFE FOR THE PUBLIC!'

Bob Pierce, manager of member services for Clearwater electric

their side of the service.

"There's a point where we make the connection at the top of the meter pole and it ceases to become our wire, and the rest of it is the customer's wire," he said. He added the crew de-energized the meter pole causing the problem.

"We're taking it very seriously and doing a full write-up on it," Pierce said. "I do know a lineman would never leave a scene that wasn't safe for the public."

Pierce called the Chieftain several days later and said the company's investigation confirmed his ear-

lier statements. He added that the employees were not allowed to work on any electrical issues on the Rials' property because it requires a licensed electrician, which

the employees were not.

"That's a line we cannot cross," he said. He also said the power is still disconnected at the top of the meter pole. "It will need a state electrical inspection to establish that it's safe to be reconnected. We are turning the information over to our insurance company and it will be up to them on what to do with it."

Pierce said that the investigation confirmed that the company sent out a crew immediately upon the Rials' initial call on April 20 and disconnected the power on that visit and safety is the

company's top priority. He said the couple could soon expect a call from Clearwater's insurance company with their conclusions.

In a May 6 email to the Chieftain, Pennie Rials said the couple is standing by its story that nothing was done on the initial Saturday, April 20, visit. She also said that Clearwater returned to the area more than once and that had

the proper fuses been used in the first place, the power would have shut off and prevented the livestock deaths. On May 13, she reported no one from the company had contacted the family after the Monday, April 22, visit.

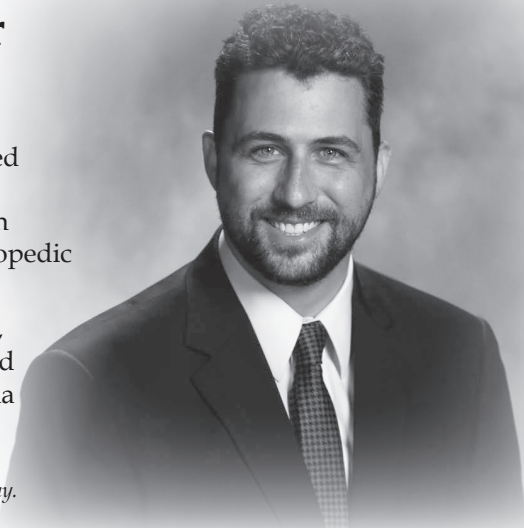
"We're afraid they don't have the fuses set right and this will happen again!" she said. "You would think the manager would come and talk to us. This is really scary and could of killed a lot of people!" She also said the insurance company's claims department contacted them and asked for the dollar amount in damages.

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