

# Keeping the lights on: Hermiston utilities test new ways to reduce outages

By JADE MCDOWELL  
NEWS EDITOR

No one likes it when their power goes out. Hermiston Energy Services and Umatilla Electric Cooperative are working to keep their customers from experiencing that frustrating phenomenon any more often than necessary. But they are also trying to move through improvements at a pace that allows them to keep rates well below the national and state average.

“There’s reliability and there’s affordability, and we try to strike a balance there,” HES general manager Nate Rivera said.

The municipal utility recently completed a pilot project for moving transformers off poles in order to reduce outages. They chose to test the project on 24 homes in the East Pine Avenue neighborhood, which had multiple transformers on poles in back yards, with primary lines running through “mature” trees.

“When we have windstorms, we would have branches land on lines,” Rivera said.

Now those primary lines are underground, and the transformers are in boxes in front yards instead of on poles behind private fences. Homes are still served individually with low-voltage lines above ground, but the lines that can knock out power to large swaths of the city, instead of a single house, are buried safely below.

Rivera said not only does the move make the area less vulnerable to outages, but when one does happen, particularly during the middle of the night, it will be easier for crews to access what they need from the street.

“We’re not having to carry poles through gates and pull wire over fences,”



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian  
**Umatilla Electric Cooperative has been trimming trees away from power lines in an effort to decrease outages.**

he said.

They are taking advantage of new boring methods that allow them to thread wire through underground PVC pipe from one spot, instead of digging a trench all along where the new wires are going. Encasing the wire in pipe instead of laying it directly in the bare dirt, as utilities used to do, helps crews avoid having to dig up yards to service the lines.

Rivera said the test area’s size kept costs down while still providing a large enough sample size for HES to learn and improve.

HES has scheduled capital projects into 2021, but Rivera said after that they would likely start scheduling some additional neigh-

borhoods to convert. He said it would be great to move large numbers of neighborhoods at once to the more reliable underground setup, but that would take additional revenue and HES is “sensitive” to the concerns right now in Hermiston about the cost of utilities.

In the meantime, HES and Umatilla Electric Cooperative try to protect above-ground power lines and transformers in part with tree-trimming. Rivera said HES has a cycle of trimming trees near power lines every three years.

He said they educate homeowners about planting trees away from poles and lines, and talk to local nurseries and stores like Home Depot about teaching peo-



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian  
**Ricky Parsons, left, and Andy Renoe work to load tree trimmings into a chipper after trimming a tree to avoid a set of power lines off of Agnew Road in Hermiston. Parsons and Renoe are employees of The Tree Service, a company contracted to trim trees for Umatilla Electric Cooperative.**

ple to understand the growth pattern their new tree will follow.

For homeowners who are willing to remove trees that electric crews must trim every three years, HES provides vouchers to plant a new tree on a safer part of the property.

#### Umatilla Electric Cooperative

UEC is contracted to handle tree-trimming and other maintenance for HES, in addition to serving its own customers. UEC spokesperson Steve Meyers said in the past two years UEC has trimmed or removed more than 22,000 trees near power lines. He said the company inspects all power lines in its 1,930-square-mile service territory during their three-year rotation.

“Because the cause of many outages is beyond our control — a severe storm or a vehicle that skids into a power pole — we can’t say we can eliminate all outages

all the time,” Meyers said in an email. “But we are working toward shortening their duration.”

Until recently, there were only three feeder lines serving the city, which meant an errant branch could knock out power to a third of the city. Since the new Hermiston East substation opened in December 2017 there are now six feeder lines, shrinking some outages in half. The substation itself has also helped by providing extra capacity where UEC can transfer customers during an outage, restoring their electricity sooner.

Now UEC is working to build a McNary to Hermiston Butte transmission line, which will also create redundancies by adding a second source of power to Hermiston so that the entire town doesn’t lose power when something happens to the city’s current transmission line.

The new line under con-

struction starts near the intersection of Highway 395 and Highway 730, running south along Lind and Geer roads. UEC began putting up the large steel poles in July, and has estimated the project will take about six months.

Like many of UEC’s capital projects, including the new feeder lines and substation, the transmission line is a UEC project but serves both UEC and HES customers.

New “smart” meters installed in recent years has allowed the utility to know automatically when an outage occurs instead of relying on customers to call it in. UEC is installing a new Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system, and Meyers said getting data faster and more accurately “is essential in quickly diagnosing the cause of an outage and putting our response into action.”

THE BEST VALUE  
IN WIRELESS

UNLIMITED DATA

**\$30** /MO.

WITH 4 LINES

 **U.S. Cellular**  
CHOOSE FAIR

1565 N. 1st St., Hermiston, 541-289-8722

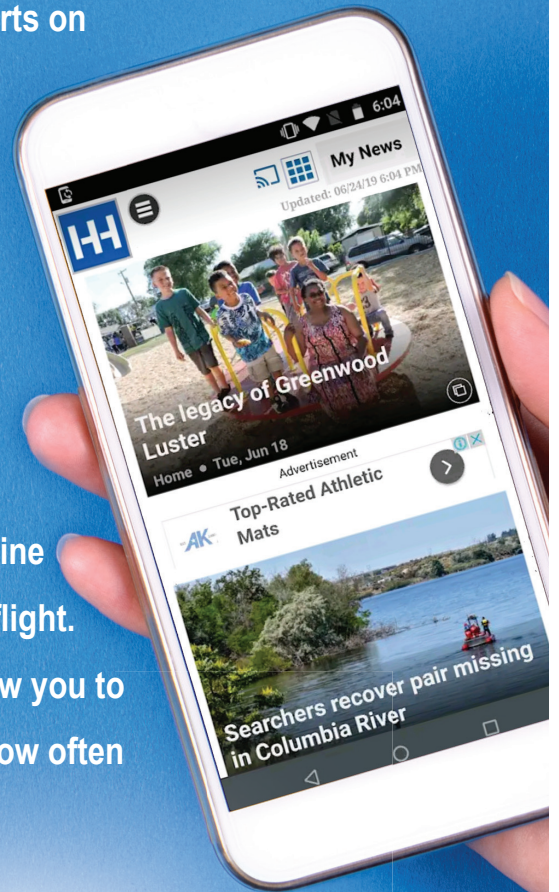
Data may be temporarily slower than other traffic in times of congestion. Video streams at up to 480p (DVD quality). Credit approval and Auto Pay/Paperless Billing required. Additional terms apply.

**Things we want you to know:** New unlimited plan and Customer Service Agreement required. New unlimited plan does not include hotspot functionality or Payback Credit. Existing customers may switch to new unlimited plans but, in most cases, any previous promotional credits requiring a Total Plan Unlimited or Unlimited Plus Plan subscription will not transfer. A Regulatory Cost Recovery Fee (RCRF) applies; this is not a tax or government required charge. Additional charges, taxes, terms, conditions and coverage areas may apply and vary by plan, service and phone. **Kansas Customers:** In areas in which U.S. Cellular receives support from the Federal Universal Service Fund, all reasonable requests for service must be met. Unresolved questions concerning service availability can be directed to the Kansas Corporation Commission Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Protection at 1-800-662-0027. All products, trademarks, trade names and service names are property of their respective owners. Limited-time offer. Prices, plans and terms are subject to change without notice. Limitations and exclusions apply. See store or an associate for details or visit uscellular.com. Store locations listed are owned and operated by an Authorized Agent of U.S. Cellular ©2019 U.S. Cellular

DOWNLOAD OUR  
**FREE**  
NEWS APP TODAY!

Our new app offers access to the latest news as it happens with customizable features for mobile and tablet devices:

- Scroll through the latest headlines while on-the-go.
- Personalize your news feed with the stories you want.
- Receive breaking news alerts on your phone.
- Explore photos, videos and more.
- Easily save articles for reading later.
- Share articles with the tap of a finger.
- Content can be viewed offline when out-of-service or in flight.
- Customizable settings allow you to enlarge type and choose how often content refreshes.



Hermiston  
**Herald**

Download on the  
App Store

GET IT ON  
Google Play

To subscribe, call 1-800-522-0255  
or log on to  
[www.hermistonherald.com/subscribe-now/](http://www.hermistonherald.com/subscribe-now/)