

Power of the People

By W. Marc Farmer, General Manager, West Oregon Electric Cooperative

And I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house (trees) down...and so it went the weekend of February 3 through 5. We knew the winds were coming and were as prepared as we could be. The line trucks were gassed up and stocked; the crews and staff were on alert and ready. The only problem being we did not know for sure where the winds would hit and exactly when they would hit, only that it was supposed to be the strongest wind storm so far this season. It was, and the results were as big as the blow itself for many parts of our system. To give you an idea of how this all works internally, I will give you a Readers Digest abridged version of how it worked.

At 10:00 p.m. the full force of the storm hit our system. The first power to go out occurred at approximately 10:30 p.m. and members started calling in the outage. Our after hours, weekend and holiday calls are answered by PGE who alerts our crew and Operations Manager, myself or the CFO, depending on which one of us is on call. If they get hit with too many outages of their own or our outage is a large one, they call to turn the phones back over to us. We lost power from PP&L to our Necanicum substation as they were getting hit with 70 to 80 mph winds. PGE contacted the Operations Manager, Steve Scott, and let him know conditions were getting bad and we may need to take the calls soon. At 11:30, things went from bad to worse. Steve was on his way in from Scappoose and found the road blocked by a 30-inch tree across the road, with one of our lines in it about six feet off the ground. He had to radio one of our crew who were headed toward the Mist area for outages, to come and clear the tree, the road, and reenergize the line. By this time, I got the call from PGE just before the power in Vernonia went out, and I headed into the office. Once here, I opened up the office and turned the phones over to us. Some of the line crews were already out in the field and others here or on their way. Operations staff were in and arriving, as well. I started answering

phones to find out where the problems were, only to find out we were getting hit from all directions. The staff answering phones writes down the names of the members, their addresses, phone numbers, when the power went off, and gathers any other information that might help us determine what may have caused the outage and how extensive it might be. This information is compiled on a sheet with substation and feeder line information and map locations to the operations staff. They communicate the information and assess which locations are a priority and where the crews need to go first. It is a choreographed operation to get members restored as quickly as possible. We don't know for sure the extent of the problem and how long it will take to restore power until the crews patrol the lines and substations to assess damage.

At one time, we had power down in two substations, three metering points, two feeder lines, and miscellaneous outages in more than eight other areas. Highway 26, Timber Road, Scappoose Highway and many others looked like a war zone, with trees down all over. Of the outages we had, the biggest were, again, from our power providers, BPA, PP&L, and PGE getting hit worse than us and losing power that feeds our substations and metering points. Our crews were scattered virtually all over our service system from Olney to Chapman to Yamhill to Necanicum to Hagg Lake to Fishhawk Lake.

We lost three poles due to falling trees, including a transmission line pole that fed power to Johnson Road and others. It was too big for our trucks, at 65 feet tall, and weighs about 5,000 pounds with all of the equipment on it. We had to call in some help that was not available until the next day, due to outages all over for all power companies. Another pole was taken out by a logging truck on that Sunday in Vernonia during the Super Bowl.

When all of the power is out to a substation or metering point, we have no way of knowing whether we have any of our own lines down or limbs in the lines until they are reenergized, then we have to check each feeder line to see if we have

power. Calls are made to members to see who is on and who is out to determine if or where problems might be. The Line Crews begin patrolling lines with problems to locate the cause. It is a long process, as distances in our system are not short. In some locations, access to the problem is difficult at best. One such problem caused the longest outage for some of our members as the line was taken down by a fallen tree and collided at the bottom of a 500 yard canyon with a swamp in the bottom. The crew had to come back with an ATV to get to the line, then had to make several trips up and down the canyon on foot to bring new lines down to the poles for restringing. The canyon was full of trees and brush so thick it made it difficult to see each other. This project took the better part of a day to complete.

Michael Benedict came in at

midnight to answer phones and coordinate information to the Operations Manager and ended up here until 4:30 p.m. I left at 4:30 a.m. to get some rest and Debbie Brown came in and worked until 6:30 p.m. I came back from noon until 7:30 p.m. answering phones, bringing in lunch, beverages, and dinner for the staff and for crews that were able to stop in for restocking, fuel, and gather more intel for their next run. Half of the crew we didn't even see for over 22 hours. All of our line crew was out for over 22 hours each, in conditions that were windy and wet, trying to restore the power as fast as possible. Kellie Murray came in to take over for Debbie and Phylis Krieger came in for Michael and both of them put in long hours into Sunday morning; Steve Scott stayed here through it all. The crews came in for a bit of rest, food, fuel, and restocking, only to head

back out and start all over again. They worked through Monday to get all of the pieces put back together and all of the members taken care of as a result of the storm.

I have a great deal of respect for the operations staff, office staff, and line crews for their hard work, their dedication, the way they work together, the care and concern they have for the members, and the attitudes they have toward the members and each other as they go through long hours and difficult conditions to take care of our members and get their power restored. I hope when you see them or talk to them on the phone that you take the opportunity to thank them as well. They really are great people who do a lot for all of us.

Until next issue, let's hope for better weather and that the lights stay on. We'll be doing our part to keep things on here day and night.

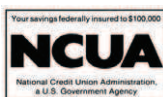


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