

WEC CO-OP CURRENTS

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The newsletter of Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., East Montpelier, Vermont.

July/August 2002

'Turning Wrenches' All In A Day's Work At A Country Garage

Here's what it takes to run a successful auto-repair business at a rural Vermont crossroads:

Co-op Business Profile

ness it helps to have a respected family name and a clean credit history. Good luck getting started without those.

Know-how. Cars have changed a ton over the past 25 years, with things like carburetors disappearing and computer diagnostics sometimes substituting for good, old-fashioned intuition.

Credit. Nobody has a lot of cash these days. If you want to start a busi-

A conscience. You might spend six or eight hours just figuring out what's wrong with an automobile – and that's before you actually start making the repairs. However, when it comes time to total up the bill you've got to reckon with that small voice in your head that tells you you should have diagnosed the problem more quickly. There's a practical side to this, too; your customers will eventually figure it out if you charge for every minute you spend beating your head against the wall puzzling over an elusive problem. In the end, that \$44-an-hour rate might get cut in half if that's what your conscience dictates.

These are some of the lessons that Gene Pierson Jr. has taken from his first eight years running GP's Auto Service in East Corinth, deep in the heart of Co-op Country. But there's another thing Gene

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Gene and Lisa Pierson, proprietors of GP's Auto Service.



A typically busy day at GP's Auto Service in East Corinth.

Rural Growing Pains: WEC Poles Festooned With Phone, TV Paraphernalia

There may be few inventions or discoveries in history that have been as transformative of society as television. Politics, war, fashion, lifestyles... virtually nothing has been the same since television came along and plunked itself down in our living rooms, bringing the outside world with it.

Yet one technological innovation that surpasses even TV for its enormous impact upon our daily lives is the household use of electric power. Electricity was confined to America's population centers until it became national policy, through the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, to extend to rural people the conveniences, comforts and opportunities made possible by electricity. That Act, and the financial innovations that followed, were the genesis of the electric co-op movement that

finally lit the ceiling lights and powered the milking machines of rural America.

Something similar is happening now with more-recent electronic advances that have primarily benefited urban dwellers. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 made it the policy of the United States government to promote virtually every aspect of the telecommunications industry, including cell towers, fiber optic-cable for advanced communications, and cable TV (known as CATV). The Act envisions a nation where those services are available virtually everywhere – city or country.

Actually, it's more than just the country's "policy" to promote those industries. It's the law. And when it comes to those

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Inside

Vermont utilities sign on the dotted line. Well, not exactly. But the PSB has required utilities to draw up 'Service Quality' plans. Read about WEC's SQRPs on page 3.

Co-op working with others to end transmission outages. They're not our lines, but when they go, so does your power. Page 7.

Got a generator? If so, LRP may be for you. Learn about WEC's program to relieve the grid on page 5.



Here's a high-voltage transmission line. They should be safe from mishaps, but it's not always that easy. Story on page 7.

New faces in the Member Services Department. Meet Shawna and Tammi on page 2.

Washington Electric Cooperative
East Montpelier, VT 05651

Members Write

Co-op Currents welcomes letters to the editor that address any aspect of the Co-op's policies and operations, or any matters related to electricity. Readers can write to Co-op Currents, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, VT 05651. Letters to the editor will not be published in the Annual Meeting (April) issue.

Aware Of The Danger

Editor, Co-op Currents:

Due to the intense thunderstorms of the last few weeks, we in Corinth Corners experienced several power outages. I am writing to thank you and the folks who came out in the pouring rain and climbed poles in the dark to restore our power.

Back in 1928 my uncle, who worked as a lineman for the Long Island Lighting Co., was electrocuted while



working on storm-damaged lines, so I understand the danger that your linepersons expose themselves to in the line of duty. We are always quick to call when the power goes out, but

when it comes back on we don't always take the time to thank the folks who are out there in the worst conditions, putting their lives on the line for our comfort and convenience.

They are all heroes in my book. Thanks to every one.

Lois Jackson
Corinth Corners

New Faces At Washington Electric

Two new employees have begun work at your electric co-op this summer in the Member Services Department – the folks in the front room who you see when you walk in the door.

There's no time like the present to get acquainted with them.

Tammi Furry

A Hardwick resident, Tammi Furry comes to WEC after more than a dozen years in the "business" end of the music business. Tammi worked for Silo Records, a Waterbury-based distributor of folk and traditionally oriented recordings. Silo was a small company, so Tammi's duties were many and varied. She served Silo as a receptionist and handled mail orders. Eventually she was made executive assistant.

Her job at Silo led to a second position in the music business, when she worked in Montpelier for the RounderKids label, a division of Massachusetts-based Rounder Records which is one of the county's leading producers of ethnic and traditional recordings. Unfortunately, when the company consolidated its operations in Boston Tammi was out of a job. Knowing that the lay-off was coming, she took a part-time job at Copley Manor nursing home in Morrisville, but lost that position, too, when the company down-sized.

"I lost two jobs within a period of weeks," she says, now able to laugh about it.

Tammi's first day at WEC was May 20, and she is pleased that the Co-op appears to offer more job stability than her recent experiences.

"I heard raves about working here," she says. "People stay here for a long time."

She likes the variety her work provides, saying, "It's never the same two days in a row." As a former credit manag-

er at RounderKids, Tammi is comfortable with the need to service members' accounts and encourage them to remain up to date with their payments. She is married to Lou Furry, and the mother of two girls and a boy ranging in age from 14 to 20 years old.

Shawna Poirier


On the job at the Co-op for just a little over a month (her first day was June 24), Shawna Poirier is already busy with her duties as WEC's cashier – in addition to helping customers as a member services representative. Every day she handles the payments that arrive in the mail and also retrieves payments from the night drop. She sorts them, makes bank deposits, and is in charge of financial transfers and related paperwork. Watch her: she does a lot of counting.

Shawna's ability to attend to lots of details may have been honed by her six years at Bond Auto Parts in Barre where, as a parts specialist, she needed to know not only what parts went on what vehicles but also the whereabouts of thousands of bulbs, fuses, belts and other automotive paraphernalia.

"I got a little help from the computer," she confesses.

A Northfield native, Shawna graduated from Northfield High School in 1988. She is a licensed nurse's assistant, and has worked at several nursing facilities.

"My most recent job in that field was in physical therapy at Rowan Court," she says.

Shawna applied to the Co-op at the suggestion of a long-time WEC employee who recently retired: Fran Bard, a friend of Shawna's mother. Shawna was a member of the Co-op for three years when she lived in Cabot. Her home now is in Graniteville. 

Co-op Currents

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The Board of Directors' regularly scheduled meetings are on the last Wednesday of each month, in the evening. Members are welcome to attend. Members who wish to discuss a matter with the Board should contact the president through WEC's office. Meeting dates and times are subject to change. For information about times and/or agenda, or to receive a copy of the minutes of past meetings, contact Management and Programs Administrator Denise Jacques, 802-223-5245.



Shawna Poirier (left) and Tammi Furry have come to work for you at the Co-op.

Promises In Black & White

Vermont Utilities Adopt State-Approved Service Plans

Over the past few years the state Public Service Board has undertaken a process of establishing standards for reliability and customer service that will apply to all regulated utilities in Vermont, including Washington Electric Cooperative. The standards for all electric utilities will be similar but not identical, allowing for differences in their resources and service areas. To arrive at those standards, the Public Service Board (PSB) is gathering proposals from each of the utilities and approving interim "Service Quality, Response and Reliability Plans," good for two years.

WEC filed the final elements of its proposal with the PSB in June. The Co-op's plan (known by the unfortunate acronym SQRP) covers a range of interactions between WEC and its customers, and lays out what members and state regulators can expect of the Co-op in such matters as accurate and timely billing, showing up for service appointments, reading meters and responding to complaints.

"The board agreed to basically everything we proposed," said Management and Projects Administrator Denise Jacques who, with Engineering and Operations Director Dan Weston and General Manager Avram Patt, designed the Co-op's proposed SQRP.

"However," said Jacques, "they conditioned their approval on our coming up with at least one service guarantee, which consists of a financial penalty if WEC does not provide a specific service by the promised delivery date. We have proposed two service guarantees, and we're just waiting for final approval now.

"In the meantime," she said, "we've been monitoring our performance in the six or seven ways that the plan said that we would. We have to file quarterly reports showing whether we're meeting the goals that we outlined."

Some seven months into the monitoring process, WEC has successfully met the service-quality goals that it proposed and the PSB accepted. Though state officials decline to compare the plans submitted by different utilities, there are indications that the regulators consider the Co-op's service standards to be pretty

high.

"WEC did propose some fairly strong standards," said Deena Frankel, director of consumer affairs and public information for the Vermont Department of Public Service, which represents consumers in matters before the PSB. "They really came forward and said, 'Here are some areas . . . where we can do better for our customers than the lowest common denominator.'"

Getting in line

Title 30, the section of Vermont law pertaining to regulated utilities, requires such companies to "furnish reasonably adequate service, accommodation and facilities to the public." Other provisions in the law authorize the Public Service

Board to determine what "adequate service, accommodation and facilities" means. The SQRP planning process is how the board has decided to approach the issue.

"The board and the Public Service Department started in 1997 and 1998 with the establishment of uniform service-quality standards

for all the telephone companies active in the state," said Frankel. "After that we negotiated plans with Adelphia Cable, Central Vermont Public Service Corp. and Green Mountain Power. Then came the municipal utilities, Vermont Gas, and Washington Electric."

Some companies – Vermont Electric Co-op, for one – have yet to face the process, which also calls for goals related to worker safety.

Compared to other kinds of regulated utilities, electric-utility standards are thus far less structured. Frankel said that telephone service and quality standards, the first to undergo the process, "are now in place, until the board decides to change them." Cable companies are guided by federal law.

But service, reliability and reporting standards are a new direction for electric utilities. The companies therefore will operate initially under two-year plans



approved by the PSB. That will provide both the electric companies and the state an opportunity to develop more uniform and appropriate plans two years hence with benefit of experience.

"This service-planning process was not driven by there being problems among Vermont's electric utilities," WEC General Manager Patt pointed out. "We specifically asked the

regulators whether there were problems with WEC, and they said no."

Patt explained that the process grew, in part, out of the discussions a few years ago about utility deregulation. Politicians and officials were concerned that if certain parts of the electric utility business were opened up to competition, consumers would need additional protections against abuse or bad service.

Consumers would also have wanted assurances that the distribution (or "poles and wires") companies, which would have remained regulated monopolies, would continue to meet basic standards for reliability and other service criteria.

Deregulation has been shelved for the time being in Vermont. But Service Quality and Reliability Plans are becoming the order of the day.

Brass tacks

So what's in the SQRP for WEC's members?

In large measure, said the Co-op's Denise Jacques, the plan formalizes practices related to the employees and membership that WEC strives for anyway.

For example, WEC will provide people with prior notice of planned outages affecting 200 or more members, through telephone messages and/or post cards; it will maintain an on-call line crew at all times to restore power in case of outages; WEC will keep a list of members with medical conditions, and provide special consideration for those members – including repairing their lines first, if possi-

ble – in the case of storm-related outages. The SQRP lays out WEC's current practices related to disconnections for non-payment of bills, which include phone and written messages and visits from WEC personnel to make every effort to recover delinquent payments without terminating power.

Plus, WEC will continue to monitor its members' electric-usage patterns, to be on the lookout for significant changes (30-percent or more) that could indicate a faulty meter, an incorrect meter-reading, or some other factor with potential financial consequences for the rate-payer.

All these practices were in place at the Co-op long before the PSB's new SQRP requirement.

In other ways, however, WEC's SQRP plan does establish new commitments. It calls on WEC to limit inaccurate monthly bills to .25 percent (one quarter of one percent) of the total number of bills, and prohibits the Co-op from estimating more


than .25 percent of the meter readings. ("We don't do that anyway," said Jacques. "Except in rare circumstances, we always read the meters in person.")

There are also commitments to arrive on time

(within an hour) for service appointments at least 99 percent of the time – though Co-op employees can be tardy in the event of prohibitive weather, when their services might be needed elsewhere.

It was these kinds specific commitments, plus the tracking of complaints and providing line extensions for new members, that the PSB was looking for. That includes the final provisions – the service "guarantees" – that WEC supplied in June: a credit of \$10 to any member whose request for installation or maintenance of a WEC-owned street light is not completed by the promised date; and waiving the \$10 fee for reconnection if that service is not performed on time.

WEC's Service Quality and Reliability Plan will go fully into effect upon the Public Service Board's approval. The Co-op is already adhering to most of its provisions.

Interested members can obtain a copy of the plan by contacting the Co-op. 

'WEC came forward and said, 'Here are some areas where we can do better for our customers than the lowest common denominator.'

— Deena Frankel, DPS

Country Garage

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has on his side, too: location. That piece of real estate at the corner of Route 25 and the Brook Road, which winds up the hill to Corinth Center, puts him in a good spot to serve friends and neighbors from Cookeville, Goose Green, Turkey Hill, Eagle Hollow, Waits River, Topsham Four Corners, and even the larger towns of Bradford, Fairlee and Orford, New Hampshire.

"But most of my business is pretty local, from the people who live in this part of Orange County," he says. "We get a lot of work based on my reputation. Piersons are well-known around here. Reputation plays a big part in it."

In fact, his uncle, John Pierson, runs a similar business a quarter of a mile up the road, which now specializes in maintaining Waits River school buses. And everyone knows Gene Pierson Sr., a retired dairy farmer who passed along his work ethic and notion of self-reliance to Gene Jr.

"My father wasn't one to hire someone to fix the equipment," Gene recalls. "When you worked for him you learned how to do all that stuff on your own. I've been turning wrenches basically since I was 15 years old. Growing up on that farm gave me a lot of respect for hard work."

That was where Gene began accumulating the know-how and mechanical intuition his trade demands. While in high school (Gene graduated from Oxbow in 1979) he also got his boots greasy at his Uncle John's service station and garage, and later moved on to a dealership in Montpelier, where he reached the position of assistant service manager before leaving to start his own business in 1994.

"I went from getting a paycheck handed to me, to getting it on my own," he says, with the small-business owner's rueful smile at the trade-off of shouldering greater responsibility while supposedly gaining your freedom.

Gene opened GP's Auto Service across the road from his current location, and added a second bay there before buying his present, larger building, which had stood empty for several years. When he learned that someone else was interested in it Gene made his move. "I didn't want another mechanic (so close by)," he explains. An absence of cash turned out not to be much of a problem; he had good credit with the bank, and he was a Pierson.

Riddles

He also now had a sizable business to run. The building, with its high ceilings, its walls presenting an array of rubber belts and hoses, the enormous tool chests, gas cylinders, hydraulic lifts and other equipment, includes three bays that are deep enough to accommodate a trio of trucks. GP's Auto Service doesn't solicit truck repairs, but you can line up



Mechanics Tom Meyette, Gene Pierson and Monty Sweet (from left) sometimes have to put their heads together to solve their customers' problems.

two or three vehicles in each of those bays so there's enough work space for a half-dozen or more cars, vans, pick-ups and SUVs.

Judging by the cars parked on the apron of the building and on the grass perimeter, as well as the constant stream of folks coming in to discuss their vehicles with Gene, his wife (and bookkeeper) Lisa, and mechanics Tom Meyette and Monty Sweet, there's no lack of work.

"We do everything from oil changes to engine transplants," says Gene. "We do alignments, computer diagnostics, and tire repair." Shortly after listing these services Gene could be seen scraping



Monty Sweet plugging a tire.

an inspection sticker off the windshield of a white van and replacing it with a new sticker for 2002. Apparently they do inspections too.

But no matter how much know-how you've picked up, and how much money you invest in diagnostic equipment and wheel-alignment machines, running a rural garage is way different from working at a well-appointed dealership in town.

There's electricity, for one thing. The Co-op lines in East Corinth are built for a rural setting – meaning they run single-phase rather than three-phase power. The latter is preferable for energy-intensive businesses, but Gene understands that it's impractical to string three-phase wire through a sparsely settled area. Most important to him, he says, is that the power has been reliable.

"I can't complain. We've been without power maybe twice in eight years."

Then there's the nature of the work itself. At the dealership, he explains, "you see the same kinds of cars, often with similar problems, over and over. In my line of work you might get a difficult problem and then not see it again for six months. Automotives have changed a lot; there are all sorts of on-board computerized systems, ABS brake sensors, air bags..."; things, Gene says, you never imagine growing up on a Vermont dairy farm even as recently as the 1970s.

Some of them can be real puzzlers. You might get two cars malfunctioning in the same way, but the repair that eventually cures one of the cars might be worthless when tried on the other. Not long ago Pierson spent 15 hours analyzing a mechanical problem which, when he finally worked it out, he felt he should

have found within a couple of hours. ("There comes a point when it's time to put your light down and walk away; clear

your mind; work on something easy. Then go back to it later, and you might hit on the problem right away.")

In the end, he charged his customer for four hours of work, total.

"I've got this thing called a conscience," he says, grinning.

"You've got to have a conscience in this business."

On the other hand, mechanical problems can stump the dealerships, too, despite their vast resources.

"I spent a month on a car when I was working in town, and couldn't figure it out. Eventually the company sent their technicians out and they couldn't find it either, so I didn't feel so bad," says Gene. "We lemon-lawed it (that is, paid the owner and reclaimed the car).

"Here, between the three of us – Tom and Monty and me – we can usually get to the bottom of it."

Business and pleasure

All work and no play can make your local mechanic a dull boy, but anything with an engine turns Gene Pierson on. In the winter he's been known to climb on his snow machine and ride 11 hours to the family's camp in Rangely, Maine.

The Piersons have two children, including daughter Rachel who lives in New Hampshire and has made young grandparents of 40-year-old Gene and Lisa. Son Adam is 18, and graduated this June from Spaulding High School.

Adam is also a racer, a hobby his father used to pursue. Gene owns Adam's three cars – a modified, a coupe and a Flying Tiger. During racing season

'I've been turning wrenches since I was 15 years old. Growing up on that farm gave me a lot of respect for hard work.'



Another day, another engine.
Tom Meyette pops the hood.

again, and Thursday finds the Piersons headed back to Thunder Road.

Rural Snapshot


Day in and day out, though, it's the demands of servicing other people's cars and trucks that command Gene's attention. And like any small-business owner, the head and heart both come into play. The weak economy affects everyone. Lisa says they are having to cut back on extending credit.

"That's the tough part," she says. "It's a matter of cash flow. Some of (the customers) are having hard times, too."

Plus, the rural economy is shifting. Small farms are growing scarce in eastern Orange County, replaced by larger "commercial" farms that milk hundreds of head at a time. Nowadays many local residents travel to Bradford, Hanover, Lebanon, Barre and Montpelier for work. Some are left out of the workaday economy altogether.

But the garage remains busy.

"If it's not busy enough, I worry about writing the paychecks," confesses Gene. "But if we're too busy..." He pauses. "I've had a motor job out there for a week and a half and I haven't gotten to start on it yet."

Eventually he'll get to that motor. He's got a reputation and a business on the line, and it's clear that those things mean a lot to Gene Pierson, auto-service owner and Washington Electric Co-op member from Corinth, Vermont. 

the family loads up one of the vehicles each Thursday, Friday and Saturday and heads off to Barre (Thunder Road), Bradford (Bear Ridge) or Canaan Speedway in New Hampshire, where Adam climbs in the seat and puts the car through its competitive paces. Lisa says she doesn't worry about her son behind the wheel of a race car; she made her peace with that when Gene he used to race.

Adam has had notable success, especially for a young driver. He took the championships at Bradford in 2001.

Come Monday, the racing cars are back in the bays at GP's Auto Service, where they are put on the scales to check their weight at the corners, tuned up and greased, and repaired as necessary. By Wednesday they're ready to go

Call Goes Out To Home-Generators: Do You Want To Sell Some Power?

WEC is issuing a call to its membership – specifically, those Co-op members who are capable of producing at least 20 kilowatts of power for their own consumption: How would you like to generate electricity – not often, but once in a while – to help relieve strain on the New England grid?

You'll get paid for it if you do.

"We don't want to mislead anybody," said Co-op Director of Products and Services Bill Powell. "We don't want our members to think we're inviting them to go into the business of producing electricity. It's just that if they have an appropriate generator that's capable of producing 20 kw or more, and they are willing to run it when requested at specific times of day, the Load Response Program could be something that would interest them."

Programs of this type have been around for a while, but they typically work on a much larger scale. LRPs (Load Response Programs) operate all around the country. In our region ISO New England, the entity most of us think of as the New England electric grid, has promoted LRP in recent years, but has exclusively targeted large private energy

The time to act is now. August and September usually feature spells of hot weather.

producers, like Massachusetts factories that are capable of generating 1,000 kilowatts (1 megawatt) or more of power. The ISO has never invited small generators, such as Vermont farmers, to take part.

This year, however, Vermont's Public Service Board (PSB) responding to ISO New England's concern about the regional need for back-up sources of power, has called for Vermont utilities to propose their own versions of LRP. Washington Electric, working with Co-op member Rob Chickering and his energy consulting business, EnSave, came up with the idea of recruiting small producers, on the scale of a family farm. The PSB, in essence, said, "Go for it." EnSave has worked with other utilities to promote similar initiatives in Vermont.

Power relief

Like most parts of the country, New England has become a summer-peaking region, meaning that the region's greatest electric demand comes not during winter when the Northeast goes into the deep

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Congratulations: You Live In A Nuclear-Free Zone!

If you're a member of Washington Electric Cooperative, that's a fact. The Co-op has divested itself of any but the most remote connection to the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant: WEC has sold its minority ownership position in the plant and negotiated an early end to its power-purchasing contract. **The Co-op has replaced nuclear power with renewable sources of power**, so that the only connection remaining between Vermont Yankee and Washington Electric Cooperative is that they're both in Vermont.

Now you can celebrate your Co-op's departure from nuclear power with an attractive, high-quality (preshrunk, 100-percent cotton) T-shirt, **and at the same time contribute to a fund that reduces the cost of electricity for needy Vermonters.**

The front of the T-shirt portrays a map of WEC's service territory, including the name of each town within that territory, and a small image of the Co-op's new logo. Below the design are the words: NUCLEAR-FREE ZONE. The back of the shirt features a cartoon drawing of a nuclear reactor, and the caption: "Last one out, please turn off the lights."

The shirt is available in black or leaf-green, with the design set off in yellow print. Sizes are adult medium, large and extra-large. Cost: \$8.

Once the costs of production have been reached, surplus money from sales will be donated to Operation Roundup, which benefits Vermonters – including fellow members of your electric cooperative – who need help paying for their electricity. Further information is being posted on WEC's website. Shirts are available for

purchase at WEC's office, and may be ordered by mail from the Co-op. Please specify sizes, color and quantity, and include shipping costs: \$3 for one shirt, \$4.50 for two or more.



Home Generators

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freeze, but in summer when millions of people are cranking their air conditioners (on top of factory and commercial electric loads). At times ISO New England needs to "shed" load or face potential shortages.

The way to relieve strain on the electric grid is to remove some consumers from it – preferably voluntarily. But if people who purchase power from the grid are asked sometimes to forgo that power and generate their own, fairness demands that they be compensated. WEC and other Vermont utilities are therefore designing their own load-reduction programs and soliciting their members' interest.

The time to act is now. August and September, still ahead of us, usually feature spells of hot weather.

"Also, this way," said WEC's Bill Powell, "people can be on board for participating in the load-reduction program for the entire summer next year. We may have to make adjustments in the program based on what we learn from doing it this year, but it seems pretty likely that there will be an LRP in 2003 and we'll be looking for people to participate."

Workings of the LRP

Washington Electric Cooperative's membership, by and large, is residential.

"But we do have some farms and a few other members who have back-up generation capability," Powell said.



A generator—and maybe a tractor with a PTO to run it—and you could be ready to alleviate regional electricity demand.

"That's who we're looking for: a farmer or small business with a fuel-fed generator, or conceivably a tractor and a PTO (power-takeoff) that can run their generator."

Load-reduction calls from the ISO are usually warned in advance. The Co-op, having been alerted ahead of time, would contact LRP participants and say, "Can you help us tomorrow between (for example) 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.?" The next day, at that given time, the member would power up his generator and take himself off the grid.

"Anyone who gets involved should be certain that they have enough electrical capacity to maintain their basic needs at the farm or workplace," said Powell.

The thing to remember – and it's sort of jarring for people who think of their

generators strictly as back-up power in the event of a Co-op outage – is that in a voluntary regional load reduction the call would come when there was no outage. The grid would be purring; and since the "peak" that triggered the call probably would be happening in southern New England, Vermonters might not even be aware of anything unusual in the weather or on the power lines – except that it would most likely be a hot and humid summer day.

A few good producers

So what about the money? And how would all the parties involved keep track of costs and expenses?


The answer is that WEC would supply a special meter capable of recording power-generation and timing information.

The Co-op would also reimburse the participant for the cost of fuels or other expenses incurred in generating electricity.

As for the first question – "What about the money?" – the rewards would be modest. The home-generated power would bring whatever the market was paying at that time (the market price for electricity fluctuates), and WEC and the local generator would split that income: 70 percent for the member and 30-percent for the Co-op. The first actual income the producer earned would go to Washington Electric to cover the cost – maybe up to \$500 – of the special electric meter.


"We realize this idea might appeal to only a few people," Powell said. "The rewards aren't great, you'd have to enter into the agreement with no promise of how often you'd be called upon to help, and it would be done at some sacrifice to convenience."

"But for a few people this kind of thing is interesting, and this is a way for some people to be involved in the region-wide effort to be more energy self-reliant. Plus, you can pick up a little money for doing it. We hope some of our members will respond."

To learn more about the LRP you can go to ISO New England's web site: www.iso-ne.com. Also, feel free to call Bill Powell at Washington Electric Cooperative to discuss the program and see if you might qualify to participate. 

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WEC Working With Other Utilities To Curb Substation Outages

Washington Electric Co-op's efforts to improve the reliability of transmission lines that are owned by other companies but which supply our substations have continued since they were first reported here in June. Those efforts now have grown to include new players.

For consumers, all electric outages are inconveniences or worse. But transmission-line outages are particularly serious for the simple reason that they idle entire substations, cutting off the power to everyone whose home, farm, business or school is connected to that facility. That's because transmission lines carry high-voltage power from the New England grid to the substations, where transformers reduce the voltage for consumer usage and send the power out to the members over WEC's distribution lines. If the electricity never reaches the substation, there is no power for anyone.

As Co-op members in South Walden, Cabot, Wheelock, Woodbury and other neighboring towns know only too well, that has happened repeatedly this summer. Most heavily affected have been the 1,400-plus members whose power comes through the South Walden substation; however, more than 1,600 members supplied by the Mount Knox substation in West Topsham have also suffered.

Between the two WEC substations, interruptions caused by other companies' transmission-line outages have occurred no less than seven times since mid-June.

Four of the seven transmission-line outages that have affected hundreds of WEC members this summer started in areas where those smaller companies, rather than GMP, were responsible.

Most frustrating to WEC General Manager Avram Patt is that the kinds of incidents that have idled our substations are really not supposed to happen with transmission lines.

"Lightning can strike a pole and start a fire, which is what caused one of these outages," said Patt, "and that can just as easily happen to one of our distribution poles — and sometimes does. But most of these storm-related outages were related to broken trees or branches striking the lines. Transmission lines have much wider rights-of-way (the cleared corridors through which power lines travel; typically they are 50 feet wide for distribution lines and 75-100 feet wide for transmission lines). The purpose is to provide extra protection. That's why it's unusual — or should be — for a tree or a branch to strike a transmission line."

When it happens, Washington Electric Co-op can do little to help its members, aside from communicating with the transmission line-owning company and standing by to look for problems on the

Co-op's system once power resumes.

Co-operating

However, there are some steps WEC can take, particularly when the problem occurs repeatedly in certain areas. To enlist the influence of state regulators, WEC can bring the matter to the attention of the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB) and the Department of Public Service (DPS, an arm of state government charged with protecting the interests of consumers). WEC can also make its concerns directly known to the responsible utilities, and work cooperatively with them to find a solution.

The Co-op has done both of these things. In a July letter, Patt called the attention of DPS Commissioner Christine Salembier and PSB Chair Michael Dworkin to the first five incidents — on June 23 (an hour and a half), June 26 (two and a half hours), June 28 (more than six hours), June 25 (an hour and a half), and July 6 (43 minutes) — saying, "My purpose in writing is . . . to inform you of these occurrences in the hopes that this will help assure that any problems on these lines are addressed."

Dan Weston, the Co-op's engineering and operations director, also arranged a meeting with officials at Green Mountain Power Corp., the major owner of transmission lines that feed WEC's substations. Weston was pleased with GMP's response.

"They were equally concerned about

the outages," Weston reported. "They had trimmed part of that corridor last year, and they're trimming more now. We very much appreciated those actions on their part."

But it turns out that these particular transmission lines form a loop that serves a large geographic area, stretching from the Comerford hydroelectric station in New Hampshire to Marshfield, and on up to Wolcott, Morrisville and Stowe. Some sections on the loop are controlled by small, local utilities.

In fact, four of the seven transmission-line outages that have affected hundreds of WEC members this summer started in areas where those smaller companies, rather than GMP, were responsible.

On one hand, the involvement of additional players might complicate things. But Weston believes it provides an opportunity for Washington Electric to play a greater role in pursuing a resolu-

'We've had these seven long outages, none of which are our fault, but our members have lost power seven times and are understandably annoyed.'


— Dan Weston

tion. The fact that a mishap, no matter what its cause, can affect substations miles away reveals that the transmission lines are not effectively sectionalized. Problems should be able to be confined to smaller sections of line, as WEC and other utilities do on their distribution systems.

"We're looking at what we can do to work with the transmission-owning utilities to improve the systems that we all rely upon," Weston said. "We're considering the feasibility of making our own line workers available to respond to problems on those lines so we can speed up sectionalization. We would have a crew directly involved whenever a fault occurred, which could reduce down time considerably."

"The system needs attention," he concluded. "We've had seven outages, none of which are our fault, but our members have lost power seven times for considerable periods, and they are understandably annoyed."

"We can't very well do right-of-way maintenance on other companies' transmission lines; we've got enough maintenance work of our own to worry about. But if we can help coordinate an effort to improve the protections on these lines and confine problems to smaller areas, that could be a big help to our members."

As well as all the electricity consumers in that part of Vermont. 



Vive la difference! Electric distribution lines (above, left), which serve residences and homes, run through narrower corridors and are more susceptible to damage from trees. Transmission lines (above, right) carry high-voltage power to substations. Utilities are expected to maintain a much wider right-of-way to safeguard the lines from "danger trees."

Transmission Lines

continued from page 1

services that are provided by wires, pole-owning utilities like Washington Electric Cooperative are mandated to make room for telephone and CATV.

"The reason for the requirement is that it's in the public interest to have universal access to electricity and telephones," said WEC General Manager Avram Patt. "And now, more and more, cable (TV) and fiber-optic are not only things that people want; many believe that those capabilities are necessary for a healthy economy in the hinterlands.

"That being the case, you certainly want to share space on the distribution system, rather than having a duplication of the poles that are out there. That's a land-use and an aesthetic issue, and ultimately it costs everyone less to double-up those services on existing poles."

But the picture isn't entirely rosy. While WEC has always been allowed to charge phone and cable companies an annual fee for the space they occupy on the utility poles, recent decisions by the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB) may reduce WEC's income from entities such as Adelphia Cable and Verizon.

That reduction will have particular impact on Washington Electric Co-op.

"To my knowledge," said the Co-op's Engineering & Operations Director Dan Weston, "we are the only utility in Vermont that entirely owns its poles – that is, all but a tiny handful of them. With the exception of WEC, electric utilities in Vermont share ownership with other companies that use poles, particularly telephone companies; they'll split an area into sections, with the electric utility owning the poles in one place and the phone company owning them in another. Our situation of exclusively owning our poles probably grew out of the early days, when the Co-op ran its lines cross-country to connect members in the most cost-effective way possible."

In recent years WEC has relocated many sections of power line closer to the roadsides, where they can be more easily serviced. But that hasn't changed the fact that WEC still owns nearly every one of its poles – and now a typical power pole that used to bring in anywhere from \$15 to \$19 in rent revenue from phone or cable attachments could net as much as 60 percent less income.

"We aren't yet in a position to fully analyze the financial implications to the Co-op from these

By law, WEC's utility poles must accommodate telephone cable (the lowest wire on the pole), CATV (the next wire up) and the electric lines. Fees charged to the phone and TV companies will decrease under a PSB ruling.



The Dix Reservoir in Orange reflects a summer sunset.

PSB rulings," said Weston.

"A lot of other utilities are seeing their fees brought down from around \$26 per-pole to \$7 or even \$3. That revenue is especially important for us, because it supports our right-of-way clearing and line-maintenance work."

Cost issues for the Co-op

WEC raised its concerns with the PSB in 2001, but the board made its decision and General Manager Patt said the Co-op can live with it.

"Our issue was that we believe the cable companies are being under-charged," he said. "While this may help to promote the build-out of cable into areas that don't have it, in effect our rate-payers are subsidizing that build-out. Cable companies are expected to serve any area

where there's a density of 15 (houses, or potential connections) per mile; at least, they have to have a plan for developing into such areas. But our average density is only seven (members) per mile.

"As we see it," the manager said, "all of our members are in effect supporting cable because of the cost impact upon their electric co-op – even those members who don't, never will and in fact cannot receive the service."


The build-out also affects WEC's member-service capabilities. When cable companies want to extend their lines to new areas, or when phone companies want to upgrade their equipment on the Co-op's power poles, the Co-op is required to respond fairly quickly to their requests for assistance. It can get complex, because telephone cable must always be the lowest wire on the pole; therefore, when cable TV comes along the heavy black phone lines must be moved down. While the companies provide their own labor and expertise, WEC's crews might have to move the power lines and neutral wires, fuses, insulators and other electric equipment to make room. To meet minimum-clearance standards, WEC sometimes has to install a taller pole to fit everything on.

"We had to change out 19 poles in Topsham and Corinth this spring," Weston explained. "It really does tax our resources. We have a lot of work that needs to get done in the warm weather, particularly during the construction season. Plus, these changes necessitate planned outages while we're doing the work, which directly affects our members."

Wave of the future

Call it rural growing pains. A generation ago electricity came to the countryside and delivered the means for lighting the nighttime, milking cows automatically and cooling milk in bulk tanks. Now, rural people (as long as they're not *too* rural) will be able to watch "The Sopranos,"

"Sex In the City" and channels that specialize in wild animals attacking one another, and perhaps trade stock from their home computers. Some will be able to earn their living from home through the miracle of modern telecommunications.

"We expect, over the years, to have a greater number of our poles attached," said Patt. "Little by little the phone and cable companies are hanging more of their stuff out there, which means there are more of our poles that are bringing us an attachment fee – even if we don't think the fee is the right one." 

Marketplace

FOR SALE: Kubota tractor, B7100; 4-WD, 16-HP diesel. 48-inch rear finish mower, 5-way hydraulic front blade. New tires, rear chains, engine heater. Manuals and extras. Excellent condition. \$7,200. Photo available. Call 802-685-3321.

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