

Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

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Guest Column



An appreciation for our lineworkers

By Nick Berger, *Director of Engineering and Operations*

WITH National Lineworker Appreciation Day coming up on April 11, I want to offer some insight on what it takes to be a lineworker, and also express my thanks to those at Claverack and around the country who are dedicated to keeping the power flowing to our homes and businesses.

Let me start off by saying that I am an engineer, not a lineworker. For the past five years, however, my duties have crossed over to the operations side of the electric co-op businesses, so I have had the opportunity to become much more familiar with the duties and responsibilities of lineworkers, as well as the dedication it takes to serve as one for an electric cooperative.

During my 20-plus years of working in the power industry, I have consistently heard the saying, “It takes a certain breed to be a lineman.” I have always found that saying interesting, although when I first started my career, I didn’t quite understand its meaning. Over the years, however, I have come to realize the truth to that saying and couldn’t agree with it more.

Let’s start with the journey to become an electric lineworker. It is no easy feat. While every utility’s apprenticeship program is a little different, at Claverack it is a four-year process that entails three major objectives:

- ▶ Completion of the Northwest Lineman College certification program.
- ▶ Hands-on training in a controlled setting. Three to four times each year, we send our apprentices to

a third-party facility to receive training in specific areas, such as basic rubber gloving, climbing and digger derrick operations.

- ▶ Completion of 8,000 hours of on-the-job training.

After completing those objectives and demonstrating competence, an apprentice becomes a journeyman lineman. And while training is an important part of the foundation of being a lineworker, what makes great ones is their character. They are dedicated, hard-working and take ownership of their work.

The power industry is a 24/7/365 business, and our lineworkers are dedicated to keeping the lights on. They are the first responders during storms or other major events. They sacrifice time with their families and friends by working all hours of the day or night when outages occur. They work in extreme weather, often in dangerous conditions, to keep the lights on for their communities and our members.

Throughout a lineworker’s career their personal lives change. They get married, have kids and move into new houses. However, the demand to keep the lights on remains a constant. The call in the middle of the night will always happen. And a lineworker will always get up and take that call.

It takes a special person, that “certain breed,” to be a lineworker, and I would like to thank all of those out there keeping the lights on and especially the great group of linemen we have here at Claverack. ❁

Claverack crews assist Virginia co-ops following January storm

By Jeff Fetzer

AS THE first work day of 2022 was winding down, Claverack's Tunkhannock District crew chief, John McKernan, was heading back to the shop when he received the call he had been waiting for the past four years.

It was a call for power restoration mutual aid, and it was McKernan's turn to go.

Up to a foot of wet, heavy snow had blanketed parts of Virginia's Northern Neck, a peninsula between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, and the electric cooperative that serves that region, slammed with power outages, was requesting assistance from Pennsylvania's network of electric cooperatives to restore power.

McKernan had not had the opportunity to take part in a mutual aid call for the past four years. Like most of the co-op's linemen, he typically looks forward to traveling outside the Claverack service territory to help another co-op restore outages following a storm. The work is challenging and rewarding. The scenery is new. The money is good.

Even so, the 59-year-old crew chief briefly considered passing on the opportunity.

"This past year, I worked more overtime than I had in my whole career — everybody here did," McKernan says. "So when the call came, I said to myself, 'You know, I worked so much in the last year that maybe I don't want to go.'"

But McKernan's response to his supervisor on the other end of the line was, "Let me make a call and get right back to you."

The notion of sitting out the out-of-state storm work passed quickly. McKernan immediately called his wife to make sure there was nothing pressing on the family calendar for the next week.



NINE DAYS IN VIRGINIA: Claverack REC lineworkers who traveled to Virginia to assist two electric cooperatives with power restoration efforts following a January snowstorm are, from left, Tunkhannock District Crew Chief John McKernan, Montrose District Crew Chief Brandon Griffiths and linemen David Gardner and Austin Kriner. The crew spent nine days assisting Northern Neck Electric Cooperative and Rappahannock Electric Cooperative restore power.

Three hours later, at about 5:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 3, McKernan was on his way to snow-socked Virginia, along with Montrose District Crew Chief Brandon Griffiths, journeyman lineman Austin Kriner and third-year apprentice lineman David Gardner.

"I am so happy that I went," he says. "It was so gratifying to go down there and help out."

The Claverack team was among 24 two-man mutual aid crews from Pennsylvania and southwestern Virginia that responded to the call to assist Northern Neck Electric Cooperative restore power to more than 8,000 co-op members who had lost service during the snowstorm. Nearly 1,000 snow-laden, off-right-of-way trees had crashed onto power lines, breaking more than 50 poles and downing miles of electric line.

"It was just total destruction everywhere," says Griffiths, noting even the drive to the Virginia cooperative was challenging, as the storm had overwhelmed Virginia's transportation crews.

This was the same storm that shut down Interstate 95 in Virginia for 24 hours. Alerted by Northern Neck officials to avoid the interstate, the Claverack crew was able to take an alternate route. Even so, the crew counted 39 vehicles stuck along the roadway between Maryland and Warsaw, Va., where Northern Neck is headquartered.

The driving situation wasn't any better when the crew began making repairs to the hard-hit northern region of Northern Neck's electric system on Tuesday morning.

"One of the the main problems was that the roads were atrocious," McKernan says. "They were discovering problems (on the electric system) up until the last day we were there because they hadn't been able to get around on the roads."

The electric system was similarly difficult to navigate, as rights of way were littered with downed trees and wire and numerous broken poles.

Because of Northern Neck Electric Cooperative's limited availability of

off-road vehicles, the Claverack crew would travel to its assigned work site each day and spend a significant amount of time trudging through the snow on the rights of way and removing trees that had crashed onto the lines.

“We had some spots where there would be 50 trees down, six spans of wire on the ground and 10 broken poles,” Gardner says.

The Claverack linemen, who were together each day of the restoration process, worked 16-hour days, Tuesday through Friday.

On Saturday, they worked in the morning at Northern Neck, helping the 20,000-member co-op complete the last of its remaining power outages. After being released from Northern Neck, the Claverack crew drove directly to nearby Rappahannock Electric Cooperative to help with restoration work there. Rappahannock, which serves 170,000



SNAPPED: Claverack’s Tunkhannock District crew chief, Brandon Griffiths, removes the splintered remains of a utility pole from a Northern Neck Electric Cooperative member’s property. The Virginia cooperative reported that 50 poles were broken during the Jan. 3. snowstorm.

members in 22 Virginia counties, brought in more than 1,000 mutual aid workers to help with storm repairs, which included replacing 600 broken poles.

The crew worked at Rappahannock until restoration efforts ended on Wednesday and was back to work at Claverack Thursday, 10 days after they left their homes to help get the lights back on for co-op members in Virginia.

All four Claverack linemen spoke positively of the experience.

“It makes you feel good when you throw a fuse on and see those places light up,” Griffiths says. “When you get done with a storm, and you did it quickly and you did it safely, you’re providing something that nobody else can do. The nice thing that we have here in this company is that our linemen are driven to do that.”

Gardner, who had never assisted with a mutual aid storm event before, says he particularly enjoyed working with employees from other co-ops and learning new techniques for making repairs. He also enjoyed getting power back on for members who had been dealing with below-freezing temperatures and no electricity for multiple days.

“It’s pretty cool when you throw on a fuse and you hear people inside their house cheering,” he says.

Kriner, whose only previous mutual aid experience had been a one-day assignment to assist Sullivan County Rural Electric Cooperative, says he was surprised how many times members — people who were without power days after the storm — would thank the crew for their help.

“These were people who were still without power, and they would just come up to us and say, ‘Thank you,’” he says. “People would see our name on the truck, and they’d ask where we were from,” Kriner says. “‘Well, Pennsylvania, but we’re up by New York.’ That blows their minds that people would come from that far away to help.”

The members showed their appreciation of the crews’ assistance through-

out their stay in Virginia. Members would drop off drinks to the crews while they were working. On several occasions while they were eating at restaurants at the end of a long day, members paid for the crews’ meals.

“When it dawns on some of those people that you willingly left your family to come help them, that’s where some of that gratitude comes from,” says Griffiths, a single father of two who had to make arrangements for childcare before traveling to Virginia.

Bucky Camburn, Claverack’s manager of field operations, says when a request for mutual aid comes to him, he has no trouble finding volunteers willing to go.

“They have a list at each district shop and it’s on a rotating basis so everybody gets a shot at it,” Camburn says. “We only send two from any district, so there’s more who want to go than we can send. The worst part is that it’s always spur of the moment. When you get that call for mutual aid, they need an answer within a couple of hours. There’s not a lot of prep time, so their wives and girlfriends might still be at work, and they gotta go home and pack and might not even get to see one another before they leave.”

It’s just part of being a lineman, Griffiths says.

“We are wired the same,” he says.

“We have the same drive. You are excited to go. You want to get it done. You want to make a difference.”

It’s why McKernan, nearing retirement and coming off a year when frequent outages on Claverack’s system called him into after-hours service more than any time during his career, answered the call to help those left in the dark by an early January snowstorm in Virginia.

“When you see the appreciation of those members firsthand — paying our bills at restaurants and clapping when you drive by — it makes you feel rewarded. It makes you feel good and it makes you feel proud of the guys that you are working with. These guys made Claverack proud.” ❁

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Co-ops rely on mutual aid network to restore power following major outages

By Jeff Fetzer

WHEN a major storm or natural disaster strikes and causes widespread power outages, electric cooperatives rely on a state and national network of their fellow cooperatives to provide mutual aid restoration assistance.

“Whether you’re an electric cooperative, a municipal or an investor-owned utility, you support each other, because no utility can staff enough full-time linemen to restore power as quickly as you need to in a major storm situation,” Claverack President & CEO Steve Allabaugh says.

For electric cooperatives, providing or receiving mutual assistance is a natural fit, since one of the core cooperative principles is “cooperation among cooperatives.”

“Cooperatives support each other across the board with everything,” Allabaugh says. “It’s what we do. What’s great about that is our members know that other cooperatives, and even our own family of companies, are gonna be there to help us when we need it.”

That ability to bring in additional crews to assist with power restoration work following major outages has been vital to Claverack in recent years, as the co-op has faced an increasing



GAME PLAN: Claverack REC’s Wysox Crew Chief Lindsay Chamberlain, third from left, discusses line repairs with Tri-County REC work crews after a tornado ripped through parts of Tri-County’s service territory in May 2011. Through their C&T Enterprises partnership, Claverack and Tri-County, along with their affiliated electric utilities, Citizens’ Electric of Lewisburg and Wellsboro Electric, have the ability to share personnel resources during outages.

number of widespread outages in the wake of an ash tree pandemic that has killed thousands of mature ash trees along the co-op’s rights of way.

“Last year, with all of the wind we experienced and the ongoing ash tree situation, we leaned heavily on our own internal family of companies, as well as our statewide organization, to bring in additional line crews when needed,” Allabaugh says.

In 2021, Claverack utilized linemen from its C&T Enterprises-affiliated companies — Citizens’ Electric, Wellsboro Electric and Tri-County REC — to expedite storm restoration work on three separate occasions. It also received mutual aid assistance from electric cooperatives from outside the C&T organization during two of those events.

“When there is a storm that goes through the area and it’s a localized event that doesn’t affect any other cooperatives in the state, we reach out to our sister companies within the C&T family,” Allabaugh says. “We do

that first. But if there is an event where we know that other cooperatives in the state have been hit, we coordinate with our statewide association, PREA (Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association) to make sure that all the cooperatives in the state are given the appropriate response.”

Rich Geosits, manager of power delivery for Allegheny Electric Cooperative, Inc. and PREA, leads the emergency response group that coordinates mutual aid efforts among the 14 PREA member cooperatives in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

“PREA is a clearinghouse for mutual aid requests,” Geosits says. “When a co-op informs us they are unable to handle an event internally, we send a request out to all of the cooperative members within the PREA footprint and ask if they have crews available to provide mutual assistance to the members that need the help. We try to match the resources that are available to the locations and co-ops that need assistance.”



STORM SUPPORT: During times of major storm damage, Claverack can count on a network of cooperatives from Pennsylvania and New Jersey to provide mutual restoration assistance. Above, Claverack and Central Electric Cooperative crews work to restore power after a January 2021 snowstorm caused widespread outages across Claverack’s service territory.

PREA's Emergency Response Group is also part of a regional emergency work group of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association that coordinates mutual restoration assistance in the eastern portion of the country.

It was through that regional network that PREA was able to quickly round up line crews from nine Pennsylvania electric cooperatives, including Claverack, to help Northern Neck and Rappahannock Electric Cooperatives in Virginia restore power following the devastating Jan. 3 snowstorm.

Nick Berger, director of engineering and operations for Claverack, says the ability to bring in outside help during a major outage is critical to reducing the amount of time members remain without electricity following a storm.

"During the storm that hit us in

July, we had around 150 line outages," Berger says. "It can take four to five hours to restore each outage, so if we only utilized our own crews, it would be days and days' worth of power restoration. You don't want your members to be out for days and days, so you bring in extra crews to help expedite the process. It's a tremendous help."

Berger notes that Claverack is often also able to use the cooperative's contract line construction crews and tree service crews to assist with storm repairs and tree clearing during major outages.

"In light of the ash tree issue, thank God that network was there and we could lean into it these past couple of years," Allabaugh says. "As bad as it has been for our members with

some of these outages, it would have been much worse if we didn't have the ability to tap into our sister companies and the co-op network."

He adds that having access to a stable of nearby co-op lineworkers from Claverack's C&T-affiliated companies brings a significant benefit to the co-op that other cooperatives in the state and nation don't have.

"Those guys from Tri-County, Wellsboro and Citizens' Electric have all been on our system multiple times," he says. "They are all familiar with us. We share a common safety director, so they all follow the same safety rules, receive the same training, use the same equipment. And they are close by. It's not quite the same as having the person literally in your shop, but it's pretty darn close." ❁

All About Eve

Stranded: Another cold-weather consideration

By Brian Zeidner

Director of Member Services

LAST MONTH we talked about how cold weather affects Eve, Claverack's Tesla Model 3 electric vehicle (EV). Based on personal testing, I found that cold weather — especially temperatures below 20 degrees — really impacted the batteries and the range.

In fact, if I owned an EV and drove it year-round, I would try to park it in a garage during cold weather. The batteries lose less charge when parked in a garage — and it requires less energy to de-ice the windows and warm the cabin up to a comfortable temperature.

As much as I like the vehicle and the significant fuel cost savings when compared to a similarly sized gasoline-powered car, I've come to understand there are some negative aspects to owning an EV.

I was reminded of this when a snowstorm and terrible road conditions stranded motorists on Interstate 95 in Virginia in January. Some were stranded for more than 24 hours, with temperatures well

below freezing.

Based on my cold-weather testing, I found that when I was warming Eve up before driving, I used a considerable amount of battery energy. With an outside temperature of about 12 degrees, I used 5 miles of range in 10 minutes to warm the car up to an interior temperature of 72 degrees.

Given the scenario described above, if stranded on the interstate, Eve would use 30 miles of range per hour just to keep me and the interior of the car warm. Assuming the car was fully charged to 287 miles when it became stranded, you would have about nine and a half hours of warmth inside the car before the batteries would be depleted. At that point, the EV would have no heat, and the car would require towing to a charging station.

I think it is safe to assume that I might be able to get more than nine and a half hours of heat if I did not let the cabin get too cold before I turned the heater back on, as it should take less energy to warm the cabin up 20 degrees than to warm it up 60 degrees, like I did in my cold-weather test.

As you have probably guessed, if you were stranded and running the heater to stay warm, you would want to leave enough battery charge to get to the nearest charger, if that were at all possible. That would save an expensive towing bill.

Don't get me wrong — a gasoline engine uses energy, too. In the same scenario, a gas-powered vehicle with a full tank of gas would burn fuel to keep the cabin warm with the same conditions and over the same period. I have not done vehicle testing in such a situation, but I suspect a gasoline-powered vehicle would fare better in such a test.

The other thing to keep in mind is the likelihood of getting stranded on a roadway for an extended period time in the winter. It can happen, obviously, but it's a very low-probability event for most drivers.

As we continue to learn about EVs, we will share our experiences with you — both the positive and the negative ones — to help you make an informed decision if you are considering purchasing an electric vehicle. ❁