

Working With Emerg

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by Brenda Kleinjan

EMERGENCY SERVICES ARE VITAL TO COMMUNITIES. And in many rural areas in the state, volunteers are the lifeblood of these services.

These volunteers are friends, neighbors and family members who train to do dangerous work to protect life and home.

And, where possible, electric cooperatives are helping these volunteers learn more about working safely when electrical facilities are located near emergency situations.

In recent years, dozens of volunteer fire departments have benefited from their local cooperatives which have come to meetings to conduct high-voltage demonstrations to illustrate the risks that downed power lines can have to emergency crews.

“We’ve done that for years. We started doing it 20 years ago – almost 25 years ago,” said Ken Wetz, manager of Butte Electric Cooperative in Newell, S.D. The cooperative conducted training earlier this year with local fire departments.

“No. 1, we think it’s part of our obligation to try to educate people on how to handle electrical fires, especially,” said Wetz.

“The fire departments want to do things right and safely and they welcome the opportunity to have us show them and teach them what is safe,” said Wetz.

Wetz has seen the training put into use.

“I went out to a fire a year or so ago and there was a fire near an electric pole and near the electric line. The fire department



Emergency Providers

saw me there and wanted to know if I could get someone there to get the line disconnected. They definitely learn from and practice what we taught them,” Wetz said.

In recent weeks, firefighters in the southern part of the state participated in safety training on high-voltage electricity.

Cherry-Todd Electric Cooperative in Mission, S.D. hosted the training for firefighters in Todd County in southern South Dakota and Cherry County in western Nebraska.

“A lot of these firefighters are volunteers and weren’t completely aware of what type of potential is there in those power lines,” said Doug Holmes, line superintendent at the cooperative.

“We appreciate what they’re doing and we don’t want them to become a victim,” said Holmes.

Firefighters attending the South Dakota State Fire School in Brandon in June also were able to learn more about recognizing and avoiding the hazards of working around emergencies involving electricity and natural gas. The state’s electric cooperatives provided the instructors for the electricity portion of the training.

“It’s one of those topics when we talk about structure fires that most of the guys don’t know enough about,” said Michael Koopman, fire chief at Baltic, S.D., and president of the Minnehaha County Fire Chiefs Association, which hosted the statewide training.

Approximately 700 firefighters from departments across the state attended the training which included more than two dozen specialized workshops, including the one on utility safety.

“We haven’t had a bad incident to bring it to a head, but we have a lot of calls on power lines

down. It’s good to know what the hazards are,” said Koopman, noting that in the past year Baltic, with a population of about 1,000, had three incidents where power lines were involved in accidents.

In northeastern South Dakota, the cooperatives’ partnership with emergency services goes to lofty heights – 200 feet to be exact.

For the past six years or so, Northern Electric Cooperative at Bath, S.D., has allowed the local amateur radio club to use its tower. In fact, one of the co-op’s part-time employees – Arnie Huizenga – holds the license for the tower. The ham radio operators in the county use the tower for emergency operations in the county.

“We can utilize the tower for emergency disasters of any sort,” said Huizenga, who has been a ham operator for 30 years. The most common use for the ham operators is in severe weather spotting.

And, cooperatives benefit from emergency providers’ expertise as well. In recent workshops, co-op employees have learned to recognize warning signs and dangers associated with clandestine drug labs.

Handle Electrical Emergencies Fast

Participate in our hazard control efforts by calling your local cooperative immediately if you observe any of the following hazardous situations:

- Downed power lines
- Sagging or broken wires
- Trees or fallen trees entangled in power lines
- Unsecured electrical equipment (such as transformers, substations or loose guy wires)
- TV antennas entangled in power lines
- Cracked, damaged or leaning utility poles

Source: RE Safety Accreditation Program

Across South Dakota, electric cooperatives are working with local firefighters and other emergency providers to improve the safety of rural areas. *Photo By: Brenda Kleinjan*