

Workers in the

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“FOR THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’.”

It's a phrase synonymous with singer-song writer Bob Dylan and one that many baby boomers can relate to.

And, increasingly, it's a phrase that electric cooperatives and other industries looking forward to future labor demands are facing.

In the next years, electric cooperatives and others in the industry are bracing for a 30 percent turnover in their workforce.

When Dr. Robert Peltier, editor-in-chief of *Platts Power Magazine*, spoke to cooperative leaders at a meeting in Bismarck, N.D., last November, he noted that the aging workforce was a primary concern among key issues facing the U.S. power industry.

“This is a systematic problem. Thirty percent of the power industry workforce is over 50 years old and will be gone in 10 years,” Peltier said.

In South Dakota, approximately 900 people are employed at the state's 28 distribution cooperatives and two generation and transmission cooperatives. An additional 1,800 are employed at Basin Electric Power Cooperative in Bismarck, N.D. Basin Electric produces much of the electricity used by cooperatives

in South Dakota, Minnesota and seven other states from the Canada border to the Mexico border.

“If you look at the statistics of it, it's a national issue facing the investor-owned and the municipals as well,” said Martin Lowery, executive vice president, external affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in Arlington, Va.

A study released by Carnegie Mellon University in March 2005 found that demand for entry-level lineworkers (apprentices) is expected to grow by 9 percent every year. By 2010, 10,000 jobs will need to be filled. In addition, more than 1,000 new power plant workers will be needed each year for the next 10 years.

That projected need for specialized workers is countered by another projection: the U.S. bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the United States will face a shortage of 12 million skilled workers (all industries) by 2010 and 20 million by 2020.

Today's utility employee is 48 years old on average. In South Dakota, that worker averages just over 43 years old and in Minnesota the average is nearly 47. The national average is about four years older than the average for all industries, meaning that utilities will be among the first sectors to suffer from the skills gap.

by Brenda Kleinjan



Future

“We think it will have a significant impact on technical and professional workers as well as linemen,” said Lowery.

Lowery said that cooperatives may see up to 40 percent turnover, especially at senior management levels.

Many of these jobs are in the nation’s most rural areas and can often be considered some of the better paying jobs in small communities.

Lowery said that one of the things that will be done in the future is to market the attractiveness of the cooperative as a great place to work.

Steps to achieve that end are already being implemented on the redesigned www.TouchstoneEnergy.coop Web site which now features a “Careers at Co-ops” tab, listing more than 175 job postings at America’s rural electric cooperatives.

Additionally, NRECA and statewide electric cooperative associations are stepping up their continuing education efforts to ensure that current workers are developing the skills that will be needed down the road

NRECA has worked with the University of Wisconsin to create a program to teach recent electrical engineering graduates the nuances of electric cooperative distribution engineering programs.

Regional schools are ramping up their efforts to fill that future need.

In recent years, Mitchell Technical Institute in Mitchell, S.D., has added a section to its Power Line Construction and Maintenance program. Even with that expansion, there is more interest in the program than space available in the classroom.

By the end of March 2006, MTI had filled its fall 2006 Power Line Construction and Maintenance program and has begun a waiting list for fall 2007 enrollment.

“We’ve never had a problem filling that class,” said Julie Brookbank, marketing coordinator for MTI.

MTI is also looking at expanding its utility training grounds to provide continuing education opportunities to the energy industry.

In North Dakota, Bismarck State College offers a variety of energy education offerings designed to provide workers for the region’s power plants. Again, a 30 percent turnover in these workers is anticipated within the next decade.

“Overall, we’re pretty optimistic,” said Lowery. “We’re really the best employers within the electric utility industry.”

Opposite Page: Fourth-grader Austin Schoenfelder checks out some of the safety gear worn by linemen. A recent study shows that 10,000 lineworkers will be needed nationwide by 2010. *Photo By: Dave Sietsema, Firesteel Creek Photography* **Top Right:** Turnover will be experienced at every level within electric cooperatives in coming years. **Bottom Right:** Four students in Mitchell Technical Institute’s Power Line Construction and Maintenance program received \$1,000 scholarships from the South Dakota Rural Electric Line Superintendents’ Association. Pictured, clockwise from back left are Jeremy Rollag, Colton; Al Coulter, Sioux Falls; Brian Gundvaldson, Egan; and Ryan Gruber, Sioux Falls.



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