

Assisting our Brother & Sister Cooperatives

William L. Caynor Sr., Price Electric Cooperative CEO

Have you ever wondered how an electric cooperative prepares or responds to a large-scale natural disaster while ensuring safety and managing the logistical requirements? These natural disasters are becoming more common in today's environment and the most recent landfall of Hurricane Irma is a reminder of what's involved.

Looking back at Monday, September 4, Florida's Governor Scott declared a state of emergency in anticipation of the advancing storm of Hurricane Irma. The following day, Clay Electric Cooperative, nestled in beautiful northcentral Florida, and less than 60 miles from Jacksonville, initiated their Emergency Operations Plan and began discussing activating Restoration Of Power in an Emergency (ROPE) to bring in outside crews to assist in outage restoration. On Thursday, the Wisconsin statewide operations managers reviewed the possibilities of responding to ROPE to support the southern cooperatives. ROPE is an excellent tool used to call on other cooperatives for manpower and equipment in large scale outage situations. That afternoon the Wisconsin general managers had a conference call and received updated information on the situation and they pledged their unanimous support.

Hurricane Irma struck the Florida Keys as a Category 4 storm on Sunday, September 10, and the next morning 18 Wisconsin electric cooperative managers and operations personnel joined a conference call shortly before forty Wisconsin cooperative vehicles, including a Price Electric Cooperative (PEC) bucket truck with two linemen, lined up and began their three-day long trek to Clay Electric Cooperative. The travel was actually the easier part of the process as documentation requirements had been gathered throughout the weekend in preparation of the commute. Forms were completed to include federal requirements for driver licensing and permitting of vehicles to travel across state lines, along with all associated state proclamations, records and documents.

Clay Electric had already forwarded its "Storm Restoration Guide" manual containing: contact information, construction guidelines and uniqueness of their system and locality. Clay Electric is considered large by cooperative comparisons, as it is approximately eighteen times the size of PEC with almost 170,000 members. That particular Monday morning, thirteen substations and 92% of its membership were without power.

The Wisconsin responders were now enroute to Clay County, which received up to 14 inches of rain and more than 12 hours of 45 to 72 mph of wind. Black Creek, the St. Johns River and other local waterways in the area were all flooded. The hurricane impacted 858 homes in the county. Of those, a total of 275 were destroyed, 175 sustained major damage, 124 had minor damage, and the remainder were affected in other ways. The flood waters of Black Creek, which flows into the St. Johns River and then the Atlantic Ocean, topped out at 28.5 feet on September 12, shattering the previous 1919 record of 25.3 feet for the northern end; and 26.3 feet for the southern end, set in 1944.

The Wisconsin crews arrived on Wednesday night and reported for duty at the Cooperative on Thursday morning. Reusable water containers, insect repellent, and sunblock were on the list of items loaded on the truck before Dave Pisca and Chris Burnis, PEC linemen, left the office in Phillips, WI, and would come in handy in their visit to the south. The weather was much hotter and humid than they were used to and when Dave was asked for a statement of his experience he said, "It was hot!" Chris exclaimed, "I was surprised of how thankful everyone was." The residents who endured much were still generous and very welcoming.

By the weekend, the Clay Electric outage management personnel were managing a workforce of 1,200 personnel in the field. Coordination to expedite outage restoration along with ensuring safety is of utmost importance when poles and wires are on the ground and covered by water, trees or other debris. The importance of following operational procedure and protocol in moments like these is crucial. Linemen verify equipment and conductor openings and tag, test and ground for their protection.

By Sunday, 97% of Clay Electric's members were restored and the Wisconsin crews were back on the interstate heading for the Badger state. The 1,200 personnel, to include: Wisconsin and Clay Electric crews as well as other crews supporting the Florida Cooperative, can be very proud of the fact that they replaced over 400 poles, 369 transformers, and installed over \$785,000 in construction materials. We here at Price Electric Cooperative are thankful for the opportunity to help in their time of need.

Helping our brother and sister cooperatives is a good feeling and ROPE is assurance that help is a mere phone call away.