Trees & Vegetation, Managing your Right-of Ways

By William L. Caynor Sr., Price Electric Cooperative CEO

Keeping power lines clear of potential dangers sounds simple enough, but without effective processes, procedures, and metrics to measure, it could be very inefficient and extremely costly. This could easily absorb a good portion of any operating budget, and possibly create a hazardous environment. There are several parts to creating and implementing a vegetation management plan in order to achieve an equilibrium that obtains set goals and decreases expenditures.

Our journey at Price Electric began with an obvious declaration that a clearing cycle was required that considered the growing cycles for the types of trees and vegetation within your service territory. Without a cycle, it is difficult and more costly to manage as crews are constantly moving from one location to another, instead of concentrating on one part of the system until it's completed. We could trim several trees in one area and then have to come back in two years to cut more trees a few spans away from where we were before.

In 2010, an outside consultant was contracted to perform an assessment of Price Electric's system in order to establish a Line Clearing Program. Once completed and presented, the Program and expenses were approved by your Board of Directors and implemented the following year. This Program allowed Price Electric to accomplish its goal of inaugurating a seven-year cycle that would minimize expenses, outages, outage restoration times, and potentially, line loss.

We are currently in our fifth year of that seven-year cycle. Once the cycle is completed the first time, expenses will decrease, and tree-related outage occurrences and outage restoration times should go down. In 2014, tree-related outage minutes were greater than all individually caused outages combined. With this information, we crafted a mechanism through outage data compilation to identify problem areas. This affords us the opportunity to concentrate readily on issues or to utilize as a metric to verify how the Program is performing.

The 2010 assessment recommended mechanical clearing, along with employing a foliar application (herbicide) strategy, for two consecutive years afterwards to eliminate woody vegetation. The mechanical and sometimes manual removal of woody vegetation (trees) is presently the majority of our clearing expenses. The herbicide is applied in the months of June, July and August. Most recently, if you live in the Phillips area, you would have received a notification of the upcoming annual spraying application. With this, you would have received an option to elect not to have this application applied on your property. The increased expense for clearing when selecting this option would be passed on to you, as opposed to all the members. For comparison, mechanical clearing is twenty-two times more expensive than spraying one time. Please take into account that the methods and chemicals used today are more environmentally friendly than those applied in the industry in years past.

The bidding process has also changed from a time-and-equipment method to a lump sum method to our existing unit pricing method in order to generate competitive bidding and thus reduce annual clearing expense. This has lowered our contracted expense per mile for clearing and spraying by 57% in comparison to 2013. We have also instituted contractual requirements for contractors along with herbicide and clearing guidelines to ensure Price Electric is receiving what was intended in the bidding process. Keep in mind that maintaining the right-of-ways in an efficient and consistent manner is every bit in the interest of you, our owner/members. This year mechanical clearing is now in progress in the Butternut and Glidden areas. Those of you in this region have consistently endured outages related to excessive tree and vegetative growth. The repeated outages in the northern service territory have compelled us to adjust our clearing rotation to address your community this year.

I hope you find these processes both understandable and acceptable as we continue to find ways to improve safety, reduce expense, and increase reliability on your system.