

A 'daunting' task



Workers spent Tuesday replacing four steel poles on a South Radio Station Road transmission line damaged by Monday's tornado that struck the Seneca area and left a number of residents without power. GREG OLIVER | THE JOURNAL

Blue Ridge Electric replacing key steel poles in tornado's aftermath

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Crews worked throughout the day Tuesday to replace four steel poles on a transmission line on South Radio Station Road damaged by the devastating EF3 tornado that struck Seneca and interrupted power flow to seven Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative substations.

Blue Ridge Electric spokesman Terry Ballenger called the work that began shortly after 6 a.m. "daunting."

"Some of the folks were amazed the original poles were bent like they were, because they were stout," he said. "Replacing those poles will be a long and laborious process. It's critical we get this done, because

we've got so many people out of power because these transmission lines are out of commission at the moment."

Ballenger added that the four poles absorbed "a direct hit" from the tornado. Although officials hoped the work to re-energize the transmission lines would be completed overnight, Ballenger said late Tuesday that work had stopped and would resume this morning at 6 a.m. Ballenger said many of the 12,000 to 13,000 members served by the seven substations will see their power restored when the lines are re-energized.

"There will be some portions of the distribution lines feeding from the substations that will have sustained

Many Oconee residents still without power

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — The city of Seneca, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and Duke Energy are working to restore power to Oconee County residents hit by Monday morning's tornado.

While progress is being made, a number of customers remain without power.

Blue Ridge Electric

POWER: Could be weeks before all service is restored

FROM PAGE A1

amage," he said. "Further repairs will be required at those locations before all the affected members can be returned to service."

Blue Ridge Electric vice president of engineering Mark Waters, who was on site Tuesday, said it's rare for such poles to break unless it's due to extremely high winds — such as the 60 mph winds that fueled the massive damage the EF3 tornado inflicted primarily in Seneca.

"Pretty much the entire southern part of Oconee County and part of Anderson County is out due to these poles right here," Waters said.

Waters said four transmission crews, each made up of 36 to 38 workers from areas including Rock Hill and Hendersonville, N.C., were working to put up the new poles.

"The shortest pole that broke is 105 feet tall, and the tallest is 120 feet, and I think the shortest one we brought back is 100 feet, and the tallest is 110 feet, so we're having to add an extra pole," Waters said.

Challenges facing the crews included trees hanging on other trees, clearing downed trees from the roadway and ensuring that downed power lines were inactive.

"They're trying to clear trees out that we have here just so they can get to the distribution poles,"

Waters said. "These transmission crews, once they get the transmission back up, they'll be leaving, and it'll be back to the distribution and the right-of-way crews that we've got working here."

Waters said there is a process to restoring power, adding it isn't immediately turned back on.

"We will be watching the loading on the barriers to make sure we don't trip it back out due to load," Waters said. "As we bring it up, we will wait to see what happens with the loading. You can turn them on, and in about six to eight minutes, you can see the load climb. So, we've got to kind of watch that load and make sure we don't go above what the rating of the breaker is."

As far as the overall work that remains, Waters said he had "no good guess" on when it will be completed.

"We'll be cleaning up through the end of the week, maybe the end of

trees and power lines, and especially houses either heavily damaged or damaged beyond repair, reminded him of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"It looked just like what Katrina did in that whole area of the Gulf (coast)," he said. "The difference

next week," he said. "It may be months before we get it all completely taken care of."

Waters said his role is to ensure that workers are being safe first, and then efficient. He also commended the Oconee County Sheriff's Office for having patrol cars blocking each end of the roads crews are working on to allow workers the ability to do their jobs without being interrupted.

"You can see by the size of this equipment, when you start trying to move it out and there are cars everywhere, it gets really difficult," Waters said. "The roads aren't as wide as they normally are because of the debris. It's a bad area, and I know people want to see it, but stay out until we get some of this work done, because it makes it harder to get in and do this work."

When Waters arrived Monday morning and saw the sun come up, the devastation of downed

is this is a smaller area considering Katrina was two or three states. But this reminds me a lot of Katrina, and I've heard more than one person say that who works on the utility side."

FROM PAGE A1

Cooperative spokesman Terry Ballenger said 10,168 customers from Oconee were still without service as of Tuesday evening. Overall, there were 12,951 Blue Ridge members without power Tuesday evening, including customers in Pickens, Greenville and Anderson counties.

Duke Energy spokesman Ryan Mosier said Tuesday evening there were 653 Oconee County customers still without power.

"We made significant progress today," Mosier said.

Seneca Light and Water director Bob Faires said Tuesday morning that roughly 3,000 customers were without power, compared to a little more than 5,000 Monday morning. He said late Tuesday night around 1,000 customers had their service restored.

"We're having to rebuild no less than three of our circuits, which are completely gone," he said. "We appreciate

the support, prayers and level of patience from the community. Everyone wants their power restored, but it's going to take a while.

"Hopefully, by the end of the week, we will have the circuits built out. But it may be another week beyond that before all services are established."

Faires said the Light and Water Department's customer service department can be reached at (864) 885-2723. He also warned people to stay away from downed power lines.

"Treat every power line as if they're energized," Faires said.

Brandon Burton, operations section chief for the Seneca tornado response, said it will most likely be weeks before power is completely restored.

"The damage to the infrastructure was very, very heavy," he said. "Some of the outlying areas might get it quick, but for some in the interior, it's going to be a while."

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