

Right-of-Way Maintenance—A Crucial Part of Reliable Power

OCEC works year round maintaining power line rights-of-way (ROW) to keep trees and brush from interfering with the safety and reliability of your electric service. Clearing the ROW is a critical part of keeping members' lights on. This is especially true in the forested areas of Otero and Lincoln County where OCEC provides power to over 14,800 members.

Mr. Jim Miller, an OCEC member from Alto, submitted the following representation of how effective vegetation management impacted the Sun Valley Water and Sanitation District:

It quietly began with increased pine bark beetle and mistletoe infestations over a decade ago in dry, high country forests. Then, a 44,000-acre high-intensity forest fire (Little Bear Fire) roared through the region in June 2012. The fire was followed by the worst drought seen in southern New Mexico in 109 years and higher-than-normal summer temperatures. Overnight, thousands of trees which had escaped the devastating 2012 fire began dying. Add these trees to those already-dead trees in the forest fire burn area in the rural region north of Ruidoso, and the stage was set for utility right-of-way and roadway hazard trees, to cause problems, and ultimately, the high potential for disruption in electric service.

Just north of Ruidoso sits the Sun Valley Water and Sanitation District (SVWSD), a small water system and Otero County Electric Co-op customer since 1965. The water district provides drinking water to 206 rural residential and small business customers. The 2012 Little Bear Fire missed district residents by yards... thanks to local volunteer fire fighters and USFS Hot Shot crews. Residents north of the SVWSD were not as fortunate—242 homes were lost in the fire.

By 2013, utility easement problems began for many miles of electric lines in rural subdivisions, including Sun Valley. Dead evergreens, mostly ponderosa pine and Douglas fir with needles gone, began to fall in high mountain winds often exceeding 60 mph. Snapped in two or completely uprooted, the trees toppled after dying just a year earlier.

Yet electrical service to the SVWSD was not disrupted. Why not? Near the drought peak, the District

requested and OCEC dispatched a contractor to remove hazard trees within distribution line rights-of-way. Contractors stayed in the area longer than requested, and felled hundreds of trees and bucked many others at the District's request. Many residents, mostly OCEC customers from across the region came to pick up and remove the free, bucked firewood. The contractor was requested in 2014 and 2015, and again remained in the area additional weeks, removing many hundreds more dead trees. Again, residents from much of the OCEC four-county service region came to remove cords of free firewood, benefiting water district customers by fire mitigation. By 2016, OCEC was estimated to have removed upwards of 3,000 dead trees out of the SVWSD area, easing an ongoing fire hazard and decreasing chances of a future electric outage.

Proactive easement thinning. Electrical Co-op and customer partnerships. Both are "Co-op" concepts. Rural Co-ops can work with local partners who provide many additional "eyes on the ground" that can more quickly identify hazard trees along many hundreds of miles of hard-to-monitor distribution lines. Local Co-ops who rapidly deploy tree contractors to significant hazard tree areas along with planned easement maintenance can stay ahead of mountain right-of-way challenges. Customer use of smartphone technology to take and forward pictures, use of GPS to ID hazard locations—all are new opportunities to stay ahead of extended drought, higher velocity winds, forest parasites in the rural New Mexico electrical power business. New generation Co-op partners.

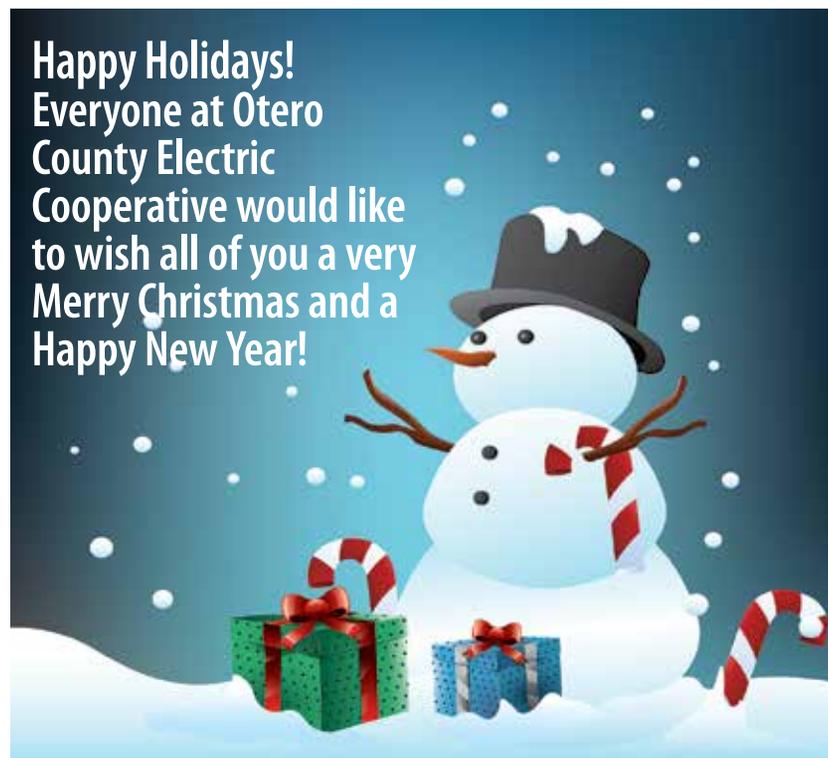
This is an excellent example of what proactive vegetation management and co-op/member partnerships can accomplish. ROW clearing is critical to ensuring we provide members with affordable electricity. Staying ahead of the game keeps us from having to come out after a storm to restore power due to fallen trees.

Remember to contact OCEC if you decide to trim or remove trees near any power service or line. And never trim a tree in the right-of-way zone on your own. ROW clearing just makes sense.

Office Closing

The Otero County Electric office will be closed on December 23 and the 26th for the Christmas holiday.

Happy Holidays!
Everyone at Otero County Electric Cooperative would like to wish all of you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



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Board Meeting

The board of trustees meets the third Friday of the month at 9:00 a.m. at the cooperative.



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