

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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VVEC Continues Storm Repair Efforts, Reducing Number of Consumers without Service

(COLLINSVILLE) – Electric service has been restored to more than 7,500 Verdigris Valley Electric Cooperative (VVEC) members since the worst ice storm in Oklahoma's history struck northeastern Oklahoma Sunday, Dec. 9.

As one and one-half inches of ice coated electric lines, weighting them down and snapping in two almost 1,400 utility poles, more than 12,000 of the electric cooperative's 24,800 members were without electric service.

VVEC is a rural electric cooperative that provides electricity to members through more than 4,500 miles of electric lines running through Nowata, Osage, Rogers, Tulsa and Washington counties in northeastern Oklahoma. It has a service territory of 3,200 square miles. Headquartered in Collinsville, VVEC is the third largest of the state's 26 electric cooperatives.

Utility employees from outside of Oklahoma, along with personnel from Oklahoma electric cooperatives not affected by the ice storm, are working with VVEC employees bringing to more than 350 the number of employees in the field replacing poles, repairing and replacing electric equipment and power lines to restore electric service.

"Ice storms are the most detrimental of Oklahoma's severe weather," says Randy Riddle, VVEC's manager of operations and technical services. "These storms usually cause wide spread damage that requires the most time and effort to repair."

Riddle goes on to explain that replacing the more 1,400 utility poles takes time and equipment. "First, we have to remove the broken pole from the ground and then remove the electrical equipment at the top of the pole. The new pole is 'framed,' which means we attach the cross-arm and electrical equipment such as insulators and braces, then it is hoisted into the air using a large truck, maneuvered into the hole by our employees, set into the ground, then the power lines are attached by employees either in a bucket truck or who climb the pole. It's not a terribly lengthy process, but it does take time, equipment and manpower. That is one of the reasons we have requested help, because we need the extra equipment and men. No utility has enough personnel or equipment on hand to remove and replace 1,400 poles without additional help."

Riddle goes on to explain during repair efforts, VVEC attempts to restore service to as many members at a time.

"During any type of outage, we first make certain we are receiving power in our 20 substations from KAMO Power, our wholesale power supplier. If KAMO hasn't experienced any outage, or has restored power if it has an outage, we then look at our substations, then the main distribution lines, or feeders, coming out of each substation. We correct any problems affecting the feeders such as broken poles or power lines, damaged equipment on the poles, or trees or limbs that have fallen onto the lines.

"Once all the distribution lines and tap lines are repaired, then we began working on individual service lines which typically bring power to one or two locations such as homes or businesses."

Riddle says a consumer who has a tree in the line from his or her house to the distribution line may feel his or her power would be restored if only the co-op would come remove the tree and repair the line.

"That is partially true," says Riddle. "But it won't do the member any good for us to come and remove the tree, if there is no electricity in the feeder line that provides power to that location. So, we first make repairs that are necessary to energize the feeder, then we are better able to determine exactly what is preventing this member from receiving electricity, and to repair it."

VVEC members have also had difficulty reporting their outages to the co-op during this storm.

"We have eight phone lines coming into the co-op," says VVEC spokesperson Kathy Calico. "Normally, this is more than adequate for our daily operations, and for any outage situations we might normally experience because phone lines are released for new calls as soon as a call is transferred. But we had so many members calling the co-op at the same time during this ice storm, that many of them repeatedly got a busy signal. We have employees answering the phones, but the number of calls has been so great there hasn't been any way we could keep some members from getting that busy signal when they call in."

"That is so frustrating for our members, and we apologize for that," she says. "The cornerstone of a cooperative's mission is being responsive to its members, but we haven't been able to be as responsive as we would like because the volume of calls has been so great."

She goes on to say the co-op's board of trustees has approved a new outage response system, but the system can't be implemented until phone lines in the Collinsville area are upgraded.

She adds the co-op's new Web site was scheduled to come online Jan. 1, adding the new design will make it a more user-friendly, up-to-date site. She says that schedule has been revised and the co-op is working to have the new site online before the first of the year.

"The storm arrived before we have been able to implement these new improvements."

Calico says co-op personnel are restoring electric service to more and more members each day, but encourages members to continue to call in and report their outages.

"We apologize for our members being uncomfortable and inconvenienced by the storm and any difficulties they may have experienced by trying to report their outages. We appreciate their patience as we work diligently to repair the damages and restore electric service."

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