

Right-of-Way Program Receives New Focus

Investment now keeps costs down later

By Pam Spettel

Work to maintain Blachly-Lane's 515 miles of right-of-way makes up nearly 15 percent of Blachly-Lane's total operating expenses. Every dollar spent in right-of-way maintenance saves in repair costs and improves service reliability down the line. Additionally, Oregon's Public Utility Commission and the National Electric Safety Code mandate electric line clearance standards to ensure the safety of citizens and workers, and reduce the risk of fires.

In January, crews conducted a



Trees growing too close to power lines can cause outages, so a Blachly-Lane crew trims or removes trees that are potential hazards.

right-of-way inspection of the service area to develop a more comprehensive plan for its maintenance. Data about problem areas was recorded for follow up this spring, when crews will first address any vegetation in violation of the PUC standards.

Blachly-Lane's right-of-way crew is made up of two journeyman tree trimmers and one apprentice, all of whom make their homes in the Blachly-Lane service area.

Right-of-Way Foreman Chris Parker's grandfather, V. A. Parker, was

Blachly-Lane's first board president.

Kevin Smith's family has been part of the Triangle Lake community since 1938. He is the third generation in his family to have a career at Blachly-Lane.

Matt Bottensek's family has been in the Horton area since the early 1960s. These men responsible for keeping our rights-of-way clear are invested in the system.

"Our efforts to regroup and take an overall assessment of the systemwide needs, with a focus on trees, will make a difference to members," Chris says. "The survey is identifying areas of critical need. We're not big enough to keep up with the growth by just arbitrarily moving through the system. Our new way of assessing the needs provides the path for getting ahead of the critical needs."

Kevin agrees.

"Doing the tree survey means we're getting the big picture of what the system looks like, what we're up against for the next year," he says. "It tells us where we need to focus our work to improve reliability for our members."

Members Can Help

By entering into a service agreement with Blachly-Lane, members grant Blachly-Lane employees the right to enter their property to access equipment needed to deliver service. Crews must have access to overhead and underground lines, poles and transformers at all times to do their work.

Right-of-way access is important to allow them to do routine maintenance, and is vital following a storm when downed trees and limbs keep members out of service.

A locked gate can be a significant barrier to getting a community back in service. Members with locked gates can help by adding a gate code to their account information kept securely in the office.

Members also can assist with keeping right-of-way costs down by choosing the right trees to plant, and planting them in the right place.



The Blachly-Lane tree trimming crew works year-round to keep trees from damaging power lines. From left are Matt Bottensek, Kevin Smith and Chris Parker.

When choosing trees, remember that tree trimmers require a minimum 5-foot clear space around the pole and line in which to work safely. Ask your nursery how tall the trees you are choosing will become at maturity, and how far they will spread in width. Leave plenty of buffer space between the tree trunk and poles and lines to accommodate the expected reach of the tree.

Remember that shrubs must be kept at least 15 feet from the front of transformer pads, and at least 3 feet from the back and sides of the pad.

Blachly-Lane is happy to consult with members before they plant trees, and offers suggestions on trees that may be challenging to maintain. Give the office a call, and the co-op will schedule a time to talk to you.

Free Tree Replacement Program

"Members should know about our tree replacement program," says Matt. "When trees become regular maintenance challenges, or will need significant maintenance as they mature, it becomes costly to the co-op. We will remove the tree and

provide the member with a new power-line friendly tree."

Members are encouraged to let Blachly-Lane know if they spot a tree on their property that appears to be growing into a power line, or will soon, or is too close to a pole to allow safe climbing. The right-of-way workers will evaluate the long-term savings to the co-op, and if the tree qualifies, the member will receive a gift certificate for a new power-line friendly tree to replace the one we are happy to remove. The small investment of a new tree can save co-op members thousands in long-term maintenance costs and expensive overtime outage repairs.

"Our right-of-way crew is as dedicated and as productive as any bunch of guys I've had the pleasure to work with," says Operations Manager Greg Gardner. "They do their job in some of the toughest conditions, getting the job done safely and efficiently. The guys on our crew aren't just co-op employees, they're co-op members who are working for their neighbors, and they know how members should be treated." ■