

Who Will Keep the Power Flowing?

About half the utility workers in the United States will be eligible to retire during the next five to 10 years

By Pam Blair

Looking for a well-paying job in a high-demand field, with the freedom to choose where you want to live and work?

Look no further than the electric utility industry—especially at a career as a journey-level lineworker.

As baby boomers turn 60 and begin eyeing retirement, electric utilities are becoming increasingly aware of the need to find and train their next generation of workers.

Electric utilities employ workers in a variety of areas, depending on the utility's size: management, customer service, engineering, information technology, line work, meter reading, accounting, communications, purchasing, substation metering, mechanics and tree trimming.

The need is especially critical and immediate for personnel capable of maintaining the electric system.

Last month, West Oregon Electric Cooperative, based in Vernonia, was short four journeyman linemen, leaving just five field and two inside journeymen, and two apprentices.

While two of the positions have been filled, two remain.

"The more remote, rural areas have a harder time finding people," said Marc Farmer, manager at West Oregon Electric.

Lane Electric Cooperative, based in Eugene, Oregon, will lose four of its 12 outside crew members in less than two years.

"It's like losing one entire crew," said Vester Sanders, Lane's manager of engineering and operations. "We've been looking down the road and working on this for five years."



Above, Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative linemen work on lines from atop a pole. Photo by Steve Schauer. Opposite page, a Central Electric Cooperative lineman does some hot-stick work from a bucket truck. Photo by Jim Crowell.

Demand Exceeds Supply

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than half of today's work force will be eligible to retire within the next 10 years, and the average age of utility workers is 48—about four years older than the national average for all industries.

Hiring freezes and downsizing in the 1990s during the industry's preparation for deregulation have combined with a traditionally stable work force, which has little turnover.

"The labor shortage hasn't snuck up on us," said Bill Stone, training director for the Northwest Line Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC). "It has been going on for 20 years."

However, he says the problem has become worse, as many electric utilities have cut back on training and eliminated apprentice programs.

Lane Electric and West Oregon Electric both still have apprentice programs, but like utilities around the nation nonetheless are struggling to maintain staffing levels.

"Utilities as a whole are not training to meet their needs," Stone said.

The result: demand is outpacing the supply, and increasing costs.

Some utilities are so desperate for trained lineworkers they are offering hefty signing bonuses to experienced tradesmen willing to relocate, Sanders said.

Journey-level lineworkers can choose a job in either a rural or urban community, and in any state.

Stone said utilities are picking off not only apprentices, but journeymen trained by contractors.

Don Jamison, an instructor with the Northwest Line JATC's Vocational Outside Line Training Academy (VOLTA), said it is a double loss when a journeyman leaves, because it reduces the number of apprentices contractors can train.

"The utilities are aware of the problem, but they still are able to hire enough linemen from other companies that they are not planning for the future," said Jamison. "They can't keep taking out of the box without replenishing it. The box needs to be filled up."

Recruiting Often a Challenge

Lane, West Oregon, Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative, Northern Lights Inc. and Salmon River Electric Cooperative are among utilities in the region trying to invest in potential future employees by offering line school scholarships—with varying degrees of success.

Last year—the first for its lineman scholarship—Oregon Trail had four applicants for two \$2,000 awards to the Northwest Lineman College.

Lane is sending one and West Oregon three people to VOLTA—a 10-week professional school that prepares students for work in the outside electrical industry.



With limited utility jobs, many graduates enter the contractors' apprenticeship program.

But Mark Contor, engineering and operations manager for Idaho-based Northern Lights, said his utility rarely gets applicants for its lineworker scholarships.

The same is true at Salmon River.

"It has not been well received," Manager Ken Dizes said. "Last year, we had one applicant, and he backed out. This year, none filed a completed application on time."

Jamison blames school counselors for not encouraging the trades.

"They are academically oriented," he said. "They only talk about college or the military. There are a whole lot of good opportunities out there that require neither."

While some line school graduates land entry-level utility jobs right away, most end up in apprenticeships with contractors, gaining experience before joining a utility.

"A graduate from a line school is

still a long ways from becoming a journeyman," Jamison noted.

Apprenticeship programs require three to five years of on-the-job training—generally 7,000 to 8,000 hours—and related classroom work.

"We've been real steady with our apprentice program," Sanders said, noting two are in the pipeline and a third will come aboard in November. "We've been trying to make our own and not rob from others."

Farmer said West Oregon also believes in "growing its own." Local "recruits" already are connected to the community, so they are more likely to stay long term, he said.

Sanders' line crews visit local high schools, promoting the trade.

"Now is the best time to get into it," he said. "It's a great opportunity."

When people talk about a lineman, most picture a football or hockey player, or someone on an assembly line—not a utility worker.

"We're the best kept secret out there," Jamison said. ■

Think a Lineworker Career is For You?

An electric utility lineworker maintains the reliability of the electrical power system, working as part of a team to install and repair lines and other equipment.

The job requires a willingness to work outdoors in any weather, strong physical condition, solid math skills, good eyesight and hearing, no fear of heights, an ability to lift heavy gear, good communication skills and problem-solving capabilities.

Pay ranges from about \$23 an hour for an apprentice to upwards of \$38 an hour for a journey-level lineworker. ■

For information about training programs, see www.ruralite.org.