

A Public Power Conversation

Meet Scott Corwin, executive director of the Northwest Public Power Association

Scott Corwin was born in Oregon and became an avid outdoor sports enthusiast. He fished, hunted and skied with his father and his father's friends, who were dedicated to mentoring the next generation.

After high school in Portland, Scott left for the woods of New Hampshire and Dartmouth College. He came back west for law school at the University of Washington. After taking the bar exam, he crossed the country to work in the U.S. Senate in Washington, D.C., first as legal counsel to iconic Sen. Mark O. Hatfield, then on the staff of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"Getting those bar results in the mail was a thrill only eclipsed by the senator personally giving me the oath of office," Scott says. "I was very fortunate to work with top Senate and executive branch leaders of that era, who exhibited unrivaled leadership and statecraft."

Returning to Oregon, Scott worked in the Oregon House of Representatives speaker's office, then moved into the energy sector as director of government affairs for Portland General Electric before moving to PNGC Power.

"That was a real turning point because I got a firsthand look at consumer-owned electricity and how rewarding it was to work for rural electric cooperatives," Scott says.

He took the helm at the Public Power Council in 2007, representing consumer-owned utilities in policy advocacy related to the federal Columbia River power system. In 2019, Scott embraced a new challenge with the Northwest Public Power Association, which provides education, training, communications and government relations to electric cooperatives and public power utilities in nine western states and Canada.

Scott has been a frequent expert witness before Congress, has been on numerous industry advisory committees, and served on charitable and community boards, including a term as chair of the March of Dimes for Oregon and Southwest Washington. He is married to Kristen, a kindergarten teacher. They have three children ages 13, 17 and 19.

Scott continues the tradition of handing down a love of the outdoors to his kids, who are closely watching the snowfall this year in anticipation of the upcoming ski season.

How does the Northwest Public Power Association help electricity consumers in the West?

NWPPA was created in 1940 as a not-for-profit by utilities owned and governed by their consumers, so there is a direct relationship and focus on value to customers.

First, we help train the utility workforce that keeps the power flowing. Electricity is a complex and always changing business; a consistent program of learning and workforce development is critical.

Second, we help utilities stay informed, connect, learn and share best practices that benefit customers by creating an array of communications tools (industry directories, newsletters and magazines) specific to our part of the electricity business in the West.

Third, we lead advocacy on policy issues, especially in the federal realm, that hit the bottom line of customers' cost of electricity or safety. Examples include getting a law passed to streamline federal regulations hindering the ability of utilities to clear hazardous trees near power lines for fire prevention, and working to protect local control and safety where the Federal Communications Commission threatened to override utility policies regarding how communications equipment is attached to electric utility poles.

What are some of the biggest issues facing electric utilities and their customers in 2021 and beyond?

When we survey members or I moderate utility panel discussions, hot topics tend to surface. Looking toward 2021, there is still uncertainty about how the pandemic will impact utility operations. This affects crew schedules, office accessibility for customers and staff, and supply chain logistics for equipment.

Consumer-owned utilities are well-positioned to know what their customer-owners expect of them regarding options for electricity generation, new energy services such as enhanced energy efficiency,

management of power loads, an ability to charge electric vehicles, or use new customer interfaces that are web- and app-based to manage their account and energy use. Utilities tend to have large long-term investments in their infrastructure, so it can take time to plan, invest and implement this industry change effectively.

The cost and adequacy of the power supply is a concern. State and federal climate change policies tend to mandate generation from variable sources with less ability to adjust to hour-by-hour power demands. Other issues are adequate transmission to deliver power where it is needed, expansion of power markets, equitable pricing policies, and the rate at which new battery or other energy storage technology is developed. Electricity remains one of the toughest commodities to store in large volume, with important exceptions, such as water stored behind dams. That plays an important role in managing system stability in the West.

What lessons do you think consumer-owned utilities will take from 2020?

In the West, many public power utilities and their customers faced a one-two-three punch from the physical challenge of operating in a pandemic, the economic challenge of their communities and businesses under lockdown and the horrifying effects of wildfires. Utilities rose to the challenge to keep delivering safe, reliable electrical service. I think there are many lessons to take from this year.

First, our industry safety culture and emergency management planning are extremely important to help utilities adapt quickly to daunting and ever-changing scenarios. In the case of the wildfires, it was inspiring to hear stories of heroic crews working around the clock in dangerous environments to clear debris and burnt poles, and build new electrical systems.

Second, nimble and quick adoption of technology and modes of working is mission critical. Changes arising out of the



Scott Corwin with his son, Theo, and wife, Kristen, enjoying the view. Scott and Kristen's fathers were both on Mount Hood ski patrol and started them skiing as toddlers. PHOTO BY HADLEY AND RUBY CORWIN

pandemic—like more remote work by some employees—may continue in some form even after life is back to normal. Flex-work, increased remote sensors and controls, and evolution in the way customers interact with utilities have been a long time coming. The pandemic accelerated this. Utilities had to ramp up quickly to get new systems in place. There is still a physical element to much of the operations work that runs a utility, and there is still a personal connection between utility employees and customers. But, as in many industries, technological innovations took a large leap forward in certain parts of the electric utility business.

Finally, even as utilities need to be cautious with their spending, they see that education and training—even in a virtual form—is more important than ever as their workforce faces new challenges and new systems to meet the quickly changing demands of utility management.

What are some of the issues utilities in Alaska face that may not be seen as much in the Lower 48?

Some of the issues are quite similar to the rest of the West. Alaska had 2.5 million acres burned by wildfire in 2019. It is further north, but it can get very dry in summer with a lot of vegetation/fuel

stored. In addition, some areas in Alaska were hit particularly hard by the pandemic when tourism and cruise ships were cut, and when the economic slowdown lowered demand for oil and gas.

Unlike other areas, the region does not have an extensive grid or markets, so generation options are more limited and location specific. Harsher weather and broad expanses of territory also drive up the cost of electricity. This is leading to development of new resources and energy technologies that might be cost-prohibitive elsewhere.

Alaska has a strong and resourceful group of utility leaders and customer-owners coming up with creative localized solutions. These are communities that come together as they always have, in the good times and the bad, to support each other and make sure they can keep the lights and the heat working.

How will the 2020 elections affect electricity customers in the West?

In general, public power utilities are good at working across the aisle, with congressional or executive branch representatives from either major political party. Indeed, most issues that impact the reliability of electricity, the cost of service, workforce issues, infrastructure needs and safety are not

inherently ideological or partisan matters. Still, there are areas worth watching. With a change in the White House, there will be a new set of cabinet-level officials and staff in important agencies that regulate the energy industry. Especially in agencies regulating the environment and public lands, the regulatory emphasis will certainly shift.

If control of the House and Senate stays under the status quo, as currently forecast, that branch would not be likely to take actions too far afield from the past few years, even with a different White House. This means even with a major election mostly behind us, there will still be a need for considerable bipartisan work in both branches of government for new regulations or legislation relating to issues that matter to western utilities, such as wildfire prevention and suppression, vegetation management, relicensing of hydropower projects, treatment of hydropower as a renewable resource, funding of low-income energy assistance, comprehensive energy legislation, incentives for research, advanced technology or climate-related policies.

Energy policy has a way of sitting for years at a time and then moving quickly under the right circumstances. It will be an interesting year and one in which electricity users will want to stay aware and involved. ■