

# How co-ops maintain safety standards



*Text and photos by Michael E.C. Gery*

*Left photo: Statewide safety director Tommy Greer (far right) and Tideland EMC safety director Wayne Brackin (second from right) observe a Tideland crew build a pole. They are (from left) Kenny Gibbs, Josh Gibbs and Kane Cox.*



*A warning sign at a Tideland district work area.*

## The accreditation program ensures that your cooperative always operates safely

Electric utility linemen do much more than fix power lines. They need to know the technicalities of how electricity behaves as well as how to dig trenches. They build power poles, maintain trucks, use ropes and rigging, cut trees, maintain overhead and underground lines, work in substations, operate heavy equipment, operate computers, administer First Aid and CPR, the list goes on. To become a certified electrical distribution lineman in North Carolina, you need 8,000 hours of documented on-the-job training, plus an additional 576 hours of related instruction.

The purpose of this intense training is not only to ensure that a lineman knows what he's doing, but also to ensure that he does it safely.

A safety program was one of the first things electric cooperatives set up when they formed in North Carolina 60 years ago. Today, those programs are considered models nationwide. The safety programs don't apply only to linemen, either. Everyone who works for an electric cooperative is required to follow safety procedures.

A cornerstone of the safety program is the national accreditation process that recognizes cooperatives that continuously adhere to safe work practices. Established in 1967, the Rural Electric Safety Accreditation Program (RESAP) is voluntary, but in this state, 26 of the 27 cooperatives participate – the highest participation rate in the nation.

The RESAP mission is to help electric cooperatives prevent accidents and any resulting financial loss to the members who own the co-op. The buzz phrase is "zero injury, zero loss, nothing less." It involves a preliminary inspection; full documentation of safety compliance of a co-op's facilities, operating equipment and protective equipment; a follow-up inspection by trained national inspectors; and regular maintenance of safe practices. Co-ops that are accredited receive national recognition, which can mean favorable insurance rates, among other rewards. Participating cooperatives may apply for re-accreditation every three years, which requires going through the whole process again.

"It's very important to us to go through the accreditation process," says Bill Stacy, CEO of Tideland Electric. "It makes sense to have someone from the outside evaluate what we do and whether we do it well or not so well. We take the reports seriously and make any necessary changes to correct the problem."

Tideland serves more than 21,000 members in six counties of the state's coastal plain. The cooperative employs a fulltime training and safety director,

supports an employee safety committee and holds monthly safety meetings in its four offices (Pantego, Grantsboro, Engelhard and Ocracoke).

Tideland EMC, among others, is going through the re-accreditation process this year. All four offices, their vehicles, equipment, substations, underground line facilities and field work will be inspected twice from top to bottom.

The initial inspection was done this summer by Tommy C. Greer, director of Job Training and Safety for the North Carolina Association of Electric Cooperatives since 1989. Tommy is among the most knowledgeable persons in the country about safety accreditation. He and his staff work every day with cooperatives on training and safety, including the accreditation program. Before joining the statewide association, Tommy Greer was a lineman for 10 years with Brunswick EMC in southeastern North Carolina. He has chaired the National Utility Training and Safety Education Association, and currently is serving a 6-year term as NUTSEA's delegate to RESAP Accreditation Committee. Jeff Edwards, general manager of Albemarle EMC, is also on the committee.

### Inspecting the Engelhard District

When he shows up at a co-op office to do a safety inspection, Tommy Greer is there on serious business.

He arrives at Tideland's Engelhard district office in Hyde County even before it

opens at 8 a.m. Rodney Gibbs, the superintendent, is there, and so is Jennifer Sadler, office manager. Also the linemen: Kane Cox, Kenny Gibbs, Josh Gibbs, Andy Midyette, Joseph Pugh and Vincent Whitfield. Tideland's safety director Wayne Brackin, who lives in Minnesott and serves all districts, is there, too.

Tommy meets with all the employees and explains the accreditation process, how all equipment must meet national Rural Utilities Service standards, how a national team will conduct an inspection later in the summer and this pre-inspection is a test run to find anything that should be changed. All facilities and equipment will be graded, and then inspectors will follow the official RESAP observation form and apply grades. The form has 135 questions, such as "Are warehouse/storage stairs/docks equipped with handrails and marked." Inspections include observing linemen at work.

"You *know* how it's supposed to be done," Tommy says. "Just do it the way you're supposed to. If you need something to do it right, get it."

As Wayne Brackin takes notes, Tommy inspects inside and outside the bucket trucks, digger derrick truck and service truck. He looks for documentation that the trucks are examined each morning and at the end of each day. He looks for First Aid kits, fire extinguishers, log books, accident investigation forms, how tools are stored, how the trucks are maintained. He looks over the garage and warehouse and storage areas, checking the shelving, labeling, fire safety, lighting, waste storage, fuel storage, fencing.

"If there's anything defective or damaged, tag it or get rid of it," Tommy says.

Tommy looks at the linemen's rubber gloves and rubber sleeves and vests to make sure they show the monthly test date. He inspects hand lines, winches, lift equipment, chocks and outrigger pads, head and hearing protection equipment, harnesses and lanyards, safety glasses. Joseph Pugh brings out a sledge hammer and asks if Tommy needs it to test steel-toed work boots.



**Tommy Greer inspects personal protective equipment on one of Tideland EMC's trucks, along with (from left) lineman Andy Midyette, safety director Wayne Brackin and Engelhard district superintendent Rodney Gibbs.**



**Preparing to head out to work are Tideland linemen (from left) Kane Cox, Kenny Gibbs, Vincent Whitfield and Josh Gibbs.**

They go inside the office building looking at storage and filing facilities, lighting, fire protection, furniture placement, lighted exit signs, First Aid kits, emergency plans, safety notices.

In the pole yard, Tommy checks how poles are stacked and the storage of transformers, regulators and other equipment. He looks over the aluminum boat this crew uses (Rodney Gibbs has a captain's license). He observes Joe Pugh work a forklift as Vincent Whitfield and Kane Cox load tools and equipment on their bucket truck for the day's work.

Out in the field, Rodney Gibbs shows Tommy and Wayne underground power line transformers to check for warning labels, locks, cable identification. They go into a substation and inspect the fencing, locks, grounding, warning signs, clearances, fire protection and tool storage.

Tideland's Engelhard district serves about 3,500 members with about 275 miles of line. The area covers mainland Dare County south through Hyde County to Swan Quarter and the Fairfield area south of the Intercoastal Waterway.

Tommy and Wayne observe a crew working in the Swan Quarter area, building a pole to serve a new vegetable storage building. Tommy looks for who's in charge, traffic control procedures, proper application of protection equipment, tools and safe work practices. Kenny Gibbs is in charge here, and he shows Tommy a new type of rope sling they use to hold the pole while they work on it.

Finally, at the end of the day, Tommy and Wayne review the steps Tideland EMC should take to ensure that the Engelhard district maintains its safety compliance. "The purpose of this is to help bring a co-op's facilities to a level were it ought to be," Tommy says. "Then it's up to you all to keep it at that level."

Tideland Electric has achieved its safety accreditation continuously since 1976 without a lapse. The co-op has experienced no loss of life or serious job injury since then either. 🌱