



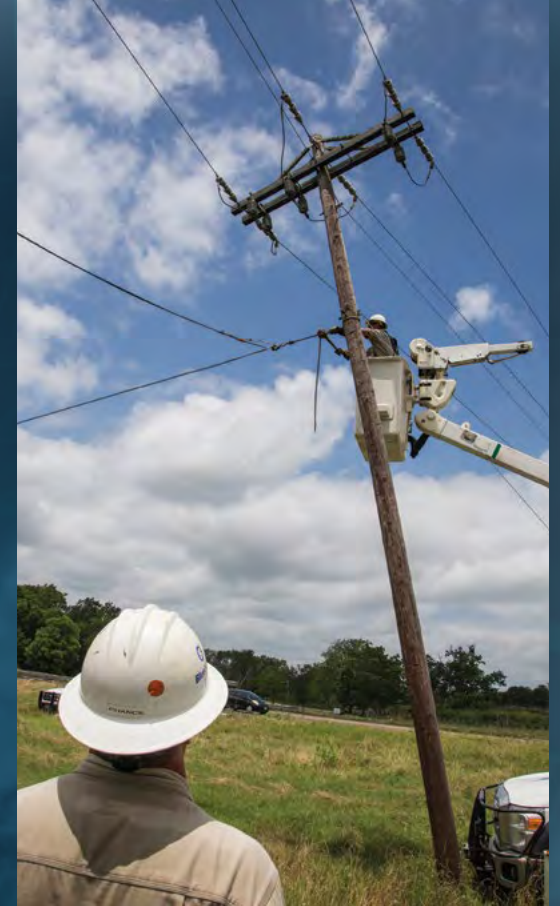
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The storms' toll

Back-to-back storms and floods and thousands without power: Bluebonnet workers race night and day to turn on the lights

By Denise Gamino

Torrential rain that creates a 500-year flood can't be avoided. Lightning strikes can't be dodged. Fierce winds can't be tamed.

The devastating — and record-breaking — storms and rainfall that slammed Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 3,800-mile service area in late May were calamitous to residents, roads and real estate. More than 28,000 members lost power — some more than once.

In response, Bluebonnet marshaled a squadron of 265 workers who put in 16-hour shifts around the clock. They forded high waters; they repaired electric equipment in the middle of thunder, rain and darkness. And they left their homes and families to work until the job was done, even though electricity was out in some of their homes, too. The Call Center and member service centers in affected areas also remained open.

The Herculean repair effort took a total of 101 hours to restore all electric power to Bluebonnet's members. Crews often were stranded by floodwaters or stymied by washed out roads, especially in Washington and Burleson counties.

"This storm was historically difficult," said Bluebonnet General Manager Mark Rose, "especially for our members who were without power for any length of time, and, most of all, for those with no power for more than 48 hours."

"We know how frustrating it is to be without power," Rose said. "We worked nonstop to repair damage and restore power as quickly and safely as possible. We organized a

BY THE NUMBERS

2016 Memorial Day weekend storms

14 BLUEBONNET-AREA COUNTIES AFFECTED: Austin, Bastrop, Brenham, Burleson, Caldwell, Colorado, Fayette, Gonzales, Guadalupe, Hays, Lee, Milam, Travis, Williamson.

28,017 MEMBERS WHO LOST POWER

265 EMPLOYEES/CONTRACTORS WORKING TO RESTORE POWER

93 TRANSFORMERS REPLACED

23 POWER POLES REPLACED

30 INSULATORS REPLACED *

78 LIGHTNING ARRESTORS REPLACED **

* Insulators: Nonconductive devices that separate energized lines from poles and cross arms

** Lightning arrestors: Devices that protect power system from lightning damage

maximum effort. Unfortunately, we literally had to go from house to house, thousands of them in all, to reset fuses and get power restored."

Matt Bentke, Bluebonnet's deputy general manager, said many of the outages in late May caused by lightning strikes involved individual fuses or transformers. That type of repair work is time-consuming and requires lots of drive time.

"It's not like repairing one damaged piece of equipment and getting hundreds, if not thousands of members back on at one time," he said. "It involves literally driving around restoring one member's outage at a time. And we had to do that thousands of times."

The Bluebonnet crews working on repairs were especially motivated because they know the people who lost power, Bentke said.

"When our members are out of power, it's personal," he said. "The people whose power (crews) were restoring are their friends, relatives, former school classmates, members of the same church, or their kids play Little League together. It's a tight community."

The May 26-28 heavy storms hit just before Memorial Day weekend. The storms caused the deaths of five people in Washington County.

The storm cell that stalled over the Bluebonnet area forced elementary schoolchildren in Brenham to spend the night at school because buses could not get them home after more than 16 inches of rain fell. Cattle near Chappell Hill fled flooded pastures and ended up on U.S. 290. Lake Somerville rose 22 inches above normal and surged over its spillway into Yegua Creek, which quickly spread like a reservoir.

Late May's storms came just one month after another monster weather pattern crippled parts of Bluebonnet's service area, mostly along the U.S. 290 corridor near Manor and Elgin. Those April 30-May 2 storms left 10,000 Bluebonnet members without power at one time. Camp Swift reported winds of 70 mph that snapped trees and power poles like chopsticks.

"In that storm, we had to remove trees and limbs, untangle a lot of wire and replace a lot of broken poles," Rose said. "That is labor-intensive and time-consuming. But the storms moved through rapidly and left us with great weather in which to work."

Unfortunately, that was not the case in late May, he said.

"The size and duration of the

storm just before Memorial Day, and the record rainfall and flooding that impeded our progress was more widespread and caused outages to last longer," Rose said.

The storm shattered many weather records. Even the National Weather Service sounded astonished, reporting that "Rainfall totals at Brenham, Texas, were simply off the charts."

"I am incredibly proud of every Bluebonnet employee and contractor who worked nonstop, day and night, for days during both storms to restore power," Rose said. "There isn't a utility in the nation whose employees are as dedicated to serving their members and communities as we are. I'm also thankful for and proud of our members who were so supportive of our crews. Their support is the reason we work so hard, every day, but especially during outages." ■



Sarah Beal photo