

# currents

**Cover Photo: Co-ops Team Up to Sponsor Critical COVID-19 Testing in Rural Communities**

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“It’s an anathema that Arizona co-ops are regulated by a statewide body, comprised of five metro-based elected officials.”

## ACC’s Latest “Sausage Making” is not a Lesson in Good Public Policy



David Lock, GCSECA CEO

I’ve spent my entire career – closing in on 40 years – engaged in some aspect of public policy. As a newspaper reporter I wrote about it. As a city manager, I helped create and implement it. And as an advocate for rural electric co-ops, I’ve been neck deep in the process at the local, state and federal levels.

Reflecting on my experience, I’ve learned one important lesson in policymaking. To be successful, the process must be open, fair and transparent.

Unfortunately, Arizona’s rural electric cooperatives find themselves under the regulatory reach of the Arizona Corporation Commission. The state’s constitution says the ACC regulates public service companies, and co-ops are considered such. This puts us in sparse company. Only Arkansas and Virginia have similar regulatory burdens.

It’s an anathema that Arizona co-ops are regulated by a statewide body, comprised of five metro-based elected officials. They have the responsibility to oversee co-ops’ operations and to approve co-ops’ rates. If this sounds redundant and unnecessary, it is.

Co-ops aren’t like any other electricity provider. Co-op members have an ownership stake in their utilities, and they have the privilege and responsibility to elect boards of directors to provide guidance and oversight. These board members – co-op members themselves – are charged with acting in the co-ops’ best interests. They know co-ops’ unique needs, as they live and work right alongside their fellow members.

When they engage in policymaking, they do so in open and collaborative processes. It’s one of the Seven Cooperative Principles – Democratic Member Control.

Which brings me back to the ACC and policymaking. The ACC ostensibly is a regulatory body, which calls balls and strikes about whether utilities are acting in their customers’ best interests. However, the ACC frequently strays into policymaking. It has proposed rules for utilities to follow, such as renewable energy standards, retail electric competition, electric vehicle promotion and cybersecurity. Each of these areas should be better left to the locally-elected boards of Arizona’s cooperatives to decide what’s best for their fellow members, but in recent instances, they have not.

The latest example is a set of energy rules the ACC is working on that most of Arizona’s utilities would have to follow, despite size, location, financial status or whether they make sense. Dispensing with the gory details, the ACC’s latest attempt to fashion these rules was not a lesson in good policymaking practice. Very detailed and complex rules that would have been very impactful to Arizona’s co-ops were proposed with scant time to review and ascertain what they meant. There was a rush to vote on an entire package of rules and regulations that were not understood and steeped in uncertainty. Fortunately, the democratic process worked – and the majority of commissioners secured additional time for a more thoughtful approach.

It would be nice if Arizona’s co-ops, like most around the country, could be spared from this sausage-making, but we’re not. So, we work hard to maintain good relationships with the ACC. We constantly remind commissioners and staff we have our own “regulators” – our boards of directors – who are quite capable of charting the course for their own co-ops, based on their best and shared interests. And for the most part, commissioners and staff have been good in helping to ease the potential regulatory burden on us. But to the extent the ACC continues to make energy policy, we will be there to make sure its proposals are fair and workable for Arizona’s co-ops. And to insist the process is open, fair and transparent.

Dave Lock

## Kathy Thatcher Elected Board President at Arizona Electric Power Cooperative

Kathy Thatcher has been elected to the position of president of the board of directors for Arizona Electric Power Cooperative, Inc.

Thatcher has served on the AEPCO board for 12 years, and is also a director on the board for Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative, where she has served at various times as board secretary, vice-president, and president of the board. She is currently a SSVEC director and has served on that board a total of 21 years. She was elected at the AEPCO board meeting in Benson on July 8.

Thatcher said the board and both AEPCO and SSVEC face unique challenges – but the priorities remain the same as they’ve always been.

“We will always work to provide reliable, cost-effective and safe electric power for the Members we serve,” Thatcher said.

“There are a lot of issues and challenges facing us right now; business continuity and reliability in the midst of a global pandemic are especially important.

“Also, government regulations keep changing, and as we get something done, they change again, and we end up having to regroup and even re-do something to meet some new regulation,” Thatcher said.

“We have so many layers of government overseeing and regulating everything we do, so that’s one of the most challenging and, frankly, expensive challenges that we’ve always faced, and we have to anticipate and work within these regulations as efficiently as possible,” Thatcher said.

“Holding down fixed costs and watching things like fuel prices and taking every



Kathy Thatcher, SSVEC director and newly-elected AEPCO board president, presents a plaque to Tyler Carlson, MEC CEO and outgoing AEPCO board president, in appreciation of his three years of service as AEPCO board president. Thatcher was elected to the position during the AEPCO board meeting at the AzGT/AEPCO offices in Benson on July 8.

measure we can to minimize the impact on the people we serve has been and will continue to be our priority,” Thatcher said.

Thatcher said the reason the cooperatives are able to serve their communities “is because of our wonderful employees.”

“Our cooperatives have very dedicated and reliable employees who go to work every day, in all kinds of weather, in the face of this pandemic, so that we have electricity,” Thatcher said.

# Co-ops Urge Support for Refinancing Rural Utilities' Debt

By Dana Cole [dana.cole@myheraldreview.com](mailto:dana.cole@myheraldreview.com)

(Note: This article appeared in the Wednesday, August 5 Cochise County Issue of MyHeraldReview.com)

COCHISE COUNTY — In response to COVID-19 and its economic impacts, members of the Senate and House of Representatives have introduced bipartisan legislation that would alleviate some financial concerns on electric cooperatives and the rural communities they serve.

If passed by Congress, the Flexible Financing for Rural America Act of 2020 could save electric cooperatives across the country \$10.1 billion by allowing them to adjust the interest rates they're paying on \$42 billion in existing loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) loan programs. Those savings would be then be passed onto cooperative member-customers, officials said.

Economic impacts of the COVID pandemic have created increased hardships for rural America, making it challenging for some consumers to pay utility bills, National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) CEO Jim Matheson said in a recent media conference call.

The Flexible Financing for Rural America Act would allow electric cooperatives to reprice existing RUS loans without paying a prepayment penalty, thereby passing those savings onto their members.

"Most individuals and most businesses in America have the opportunity to refinance debt without a prepayment penalty and take advantage of what are now really low interest rates in the marketplace," Matheson said.

"We (electric cooperatives) don't have that opportunity because for us to eliminate the prepayment penalty, it's going to require an act of Congress."

The bill, whose lead sponsors include Rep. Tom O'Halleran (D-Ariz.) and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.), has received bipartisan support. The legislation will give co-ops the flexibility to manage financial shortfalls while focusing on the long-term stability of the communities they serve, Matheson said.

"These bills have been introduced in a bipartisan way, and we're building bipartisan co-sponsorship as we move forward," Matheson said. "It's the right thing to do for rural America."

Collectively, there are six distribution co-ops across Arizona, serving 500,000 people.

Arizona Electric Power Cooperative, Inc. (AEPCO), the cooperative that provides power to most of the state's co-ops, including Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc., owes about \$167 million to the RUS program, according to AEPCO CEO Patrick Ledger.

"If we can take that \$167 million and refinance it through this program at a lower interest rate without penalty, then we can drop that interest rate cost annually...to about half, which is significant," Ledger said.

Over 15 years, that would lower AEPCO's cost by at least \$15.5 million, maybe more, Ledger added.

It's a savings that translates into lower costs for AEPCO and its Member Cooperatives.

"This current pandemic and its economic impacts could have lasting effects on AEPCO's members," Ledger said. "The legislation is one way to help lessen some of those impacts."

Along with AEPCO, other RUS borrowers in Arizona include Trico Electric Co-op in Marana and Mohave Electric Co-op in western Arizona.

Dave Lock, CEO of Grand Canyon State Electric Cooperative Association said that throughout Arizona, electric cooperatives are working together to help ease pandemic impacts for their members.

"Grand Canyon has procured test kits for all co-ops around the state to get critical employees tested as well as provided kits to hospitals," he said. "We have also provided masks to our Member Co-ops and the Navajo Nation when masks were in short supply."

The co-ops have also signed mutual aid agreements to assist each other if a critical event should arise, Lock said while touching on Grand Canyon's community outreach response during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, NRECA hopes the Flexible Financing for Rural America bill will be attached to the next COVID relief package "if and when" that package moves through Congress.

"We've not talked to one member of the House or Senate who opposes this idea," said Matheson, who encourages grassroots support from the public.

"It's very important for elected officials to hear from folks back home in the real world," he said.

"We don't know when this pandemic is going to resolve itself, but we know we are going to enter a period of economic recovery afterward," Matheson said. "Rural America usually lags the rest of the country when it comes to economic recovery. This (bill) would be a fantastic and meaningful step to take in creating a stronger economic foundation for the electric cooperatives which are part of all these rural communities... It's a good policy for the short-term and a good policy for the long-term as well."

## More Coverage

The Flexible Financing for Rural America Act, whose lead sponsors include Rep. Tom O'Halleran (D-Ariz.) and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.), would help electric cooperative communities by allowing the co-ops to reprice loans through the USDA's Rural Utilities Service program without a prepayment penalty. If approved by Congress, this new legislation is expected to help ease financial burdens for consumers during these uncertain times and enable a faster, stronger economic recovery, according to cooperative CEOs. The Flexible Financing legislation is receiving bipartisan support and is endorsed by the following co-op leaders:

- **Jim Matheson, CEO, National Electric Cooperative Association**
- **Dave Lock, CEO, Grand Canyon State Electric Cooperative Association**
- **Patrick Ledger, CEO, Arizona G&T Cooperatives/Arizona Electric Power Cooperative**

## MEC and Golden Vertex Break Ground on New Power Line to Provide Electric Service to Moss Mine.

Golden Vertex has begun construction of a new 6.9-mile, three-phase, 24.9 kV power line as part of the Moss Mine Federal Lands Expansion project. The line will tie into an existing power line at the intersection of Silver Creek Road and Bullhead Parkway. This new power line will allow Golden Vertex to convert the Moss Mine from onsite, diesel-generated power to utility grid power supplied by Mohave Electric Cooperative.



*U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, second from left, tours Moss Mine with, from left, Mohave Electric COO Rick Campos, MEC CEO Tyler Carlson, and Golden Vertex President Joe Bardswich.*

US Congressman Paul Gosar visited Moss Mine in July and toured the operation with Golden Vertex Corporation President Joe Bardswich, MEC CEO Tyler Carlson and COO Rick Campos.

Currently, electricity is supplied to the mine by eight 455 kW Tier IV Final diesel generators that power the crushing and Merrill Crowe plants, the offices, shops and laboratories. Seven smaller diesel generators ranging in size from 6 kW to 240 kW are located adjacent to pumping facilities. As these engines age, it is anticipated that maintenance and instances and duration of equipment failures will increase. MEC has a proven record for reliable electric system operation and fast restore times when outage events occur.

Utility grid power enables replacement of the generators and will save the company an estimated \$130,000 per month at present diesel prices, eliminate the burning of 5,600 gallons of diesel per day, and reduce emissions by 840 tons of noxious gases per year as well as drastically lessen emissions of particulate matter, carbon monoxide, and oxides of nitrogen into the atmosphere. This project will also increase the efficiency of the mining operations by substituting high-cost, diesel-generated power with lower-cost, more reliable utility power.

A communications fiber-optic cable will be installed on the new power line poles. The fiber-optic line will provide data and communications capabilities for mine operations, precious metals security and camera systems, and environmental control and monitoring.

Funding for the project was provided by the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Loan Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The EECLP provides funds to reduce emissions from diesel generation of electricity and help strengthen rural economies through job creation for energy efficiency and conservation projects. The Moss Mine project is responsible for over 140 jobs and millions of dollars of economic activity for the state of Arizona.

## Trico Lineman Goes “Above and Beyond” to Help Sahuarita Food Bank



*Trico lineman Jaime Esparza (right) directs Omar Fernandez where to place a transformer for the container.*

Carlos Valles, Executive Director of the Sahuarita Food Bank (SFB), said Trico Electric Cooperative Lineman Jaime Esparza “went above and beyond in getting us the required transformer” for a new 40-foot, cold-storage container needed to serve the increased demand from the community.

“Jaime also recommended we apply for a grant to help offset the costs for the electrical work,” Carlos said. “I never expected anything beyond some advice on various ways we could get our new cooler connected to the power grid. Thank you, Jaime!”

Jaime, who is retired from the military, got involved with the project when his good friend Omar Fernandez, a master sergeant in the Air National Guard, asked him for feedback regarding the electrical needs for the storage container. Jaime noticed the voltage was different on the unit. Jaime’s supervisor, Scott Rast, also deserves credit as well as Trico designers and warehouse employees. This was truly a team effort.

At the May board meeting, the directors approved a grant of \$5,000 to cover the cost of the upgrade and to provide funds to go toward SFB’s operations.

“Words cannot express how grateful we are to Jaime and everyone at Trico,” Carlos said. “Jaime is an incredible employee; he has a military background and is the first vet I have met that is retired from three branches of the military. In the military, you are taught to go above and beyond, and Jaime has done that for the Sahuarita Food Bank. He is just a good guy.

“On his days off he was here working, and he met with inspectors to make sure everything was safe and running efficiently.”

# Safety First - AzGT Line Crew Installs Transmission Line Markers Near Sahuarita Airstrip

High-visibility markers can make a life-or-death difference for pilots

Safety is job one for the AzGT line crew and during a recent project at the Flying Diamond Airpark west of Sahuarita, it was also the first priority for pilots who have to take off and land while keeping clear of the 115 kV Bicknell to Three Points line at the east end of the airstrip. The line serves Trico's service territory.

Airpark resident Kevin Hall said he's flown into and out of the private housing development "probably hundreds of times with friends" and it can be a little hair-raising to come in over the power lines.

"These lines are directly in the flight path and planes always land from the east, so it's a little bit nerve-wracking to come in so low over those lines," Hall said.

"You sometimes have to come in 'scarily' low," Hall said.

That's why being able to see the lines is so critical, and why airpark managers recently asked the AzGT line crew to replace the existing line markers, which over the years had become faded and difficult to see.

Jason Searle, AzGT hotstick lineman, is also a private pilot and he looked closely at the lines as a Cessna 172 departed the runway and cleared the lines while he and the rest of the crew were working. The team on the project included Searle, Barry Jackson, transmission line working foreman, Tony Ferraro, hotstick lineman, and Brandon Guinane, hotstick lineman apprentice.



A private plane comes in for a landing at the Flying Diamond Airpark west of Sahuarita, as the AzGT line crew replaces transmission line visibility markers on the 115 kV Bicknell-Three Points line.

"It can be hard to see power lines, depending on how high you are and other factors," said Searle.

"Those can include the performance of the plane, how hot a day it is, the wind, and other factors that play in to it and there can be some challenges," Searle said.

"You can go online or you have a book that lists every airport and airstrip, and things like how far from the runway you've got a power line, how high it is, things like that," Searle said.

"Ultimately it's up to the pilot to know what's there, but these markers add an extra level of safety," Searle said.

Jackson said replacing transmission line markers isn't a difficult job, but there are some challenges.

"Going up there with these huge markers, and then you've got these small nuts and bolts and of course, they have to be attached correctly, and it takes some time to do the job," said Jackson.

The markers are attached at the top static line, which doesn't carry current. The three lines carrying current were energized while the markers were replaced, and the members of the line crew have to maintain a three-foot, six-inch (3'6") clearance between the boom and the bucket they're in as they work.

"We might do a job like this once every three years; we replaced a bunch of them up on the Morenci-Hackberry line, with a helicopter," Jackson said.

"We're happy to do it," Jackson said.



This is an aerial view of the AzGT line crew replacing transmission line visibility markers on the 115 kV Bicknell-Three Points line. Tony Ferraro, hotstick lineman, and Brandon Guinane, hotstick lineman apprentice, are in the bucket.



Brandon Guinane (l), hotstick lineman apprentice, and Tony Ferraro, hotstick lineman, assemble a new transmission line visibility marker (orange ball) before installing it on the 115 kV Bicknell-Three Points line. The white ball is the old marker that was being replaced.

# Co-ops Donate Face Masks to Navajo Nation Kayenta Chapter House

Co-op communities are no stranger to lending a helping hand to those in need. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, many communities across the state of Arizona remain with unmet needs in response to this uncertain time. Recently several of our co-op communities fought to secure “personal protective equipment,” or PPE. With line crews and many co-op employees continuing to work as vital and essential parts of maintaining reliable power to our members, these employees were in need of PPE to ensure that they were kept safe. Through the help of NRECA, our statewide GCSECA office was able to provide these member communities with large quantities of donated face masks for protection and prevention. These shipments were received at our co-op community’s headquarters and utilized well.

GCSECA also secured another donation order of face masks for our co-op community when FEMA reached out to NRECA to offer a large donation in addition to what the Department of Energy (DOE) had already supplied. As a result of FEMA’s donation, GCSECA received a second shipment of more than 2,000 face masks to be distributed among our co-ops. With such a large supply donated to our communities, GCSECA was left with a large surplus of remaining masks after each co-op received their requested amount of PPE.

Serving our communities is an area where co-ops strive for excellence. With the needs of our co-op community being met beyond expectation, GCSECA recognized the same need in other rural areas of our state. The Kayenta Chapter House of Navajo Nation was in



*Member & Public Relations Manager, Hannah Capozzi, posing with the order of face masks for the Kayenta Chapter House. The community asked for a photo with the shipment of masks to better thank those involved.*

need of mask donations in any quantity. With the surplus of remaining masks from our order, GCSECA found another rural community in need and decided to help. By the end of the day, GCSECA packaged and shipped an order of 400 Hanes-brand, cloth face masks to the Kayenta Chapter House, complete with a note of encouragement and hope.

Rural, electric co-op communities are all too familiar with the struggle of access to resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. From our lobbyists working hard to have COVID-19 tests available in our communities, to securing PPE for our employees working across the state, we understand how hard it can be to secure the needs of our communities during this uncertain time. With this principle in mind, GCSECA set out to ease this burden for other rural communities in our state. The Kayenta Chapter House expressed their gratitude and thanks to the Arizona electric cooperative members and their communities for our generosity in sharing our resource of face masks. Since the time that GCSECA’s donation was confirmed and shipped, the Kayenta Chapter House has removed their request for any additional face masks, and we are filled with hope and a sense of unity by helping to meet this all-too-familiar need. “The representative for Navajo nation within the Arizona legislature also expressed his gratitude towards GCSECA and our co-op community for the helpful donation. “I am so thankful that an amazing organization, such as GCSECA, held out a helping hand to the community of Kayenta with a much-needed donation of personal protective face masks. A’hee’hee nitsaago GCSECA! Your donation will help slow the spread of this horrible virus,” said Representative Alrando Teller (D – Chinle).”

During these unprecedented times, our co-op communities understand the power of unity and outreach. Find a need, and fill it. Thank you to our co-ops for keeping the concern and health of our communities a top priority during this pandemic, and for showing this same commitment to community with others.



*Above is an example of the donated Hanes-brand, cloth face masks and an official letter from GCSECA to the Kayenta Chapter House that was sent with the donation.*

# Sharing Success Boosts Its Reach During the Pandemic

## Partnership between AzGT and CoBank delivers more money to more local groups during the challenges of the pandemic

Throughout the year, Arizona Generation and Transmission Cooperatives (AzGT) observes the Seventh Cooperative Principal, Concern for Community, by supporting the charities and organizations that operate in the communities it serves. And each year, CoBank, a financial institution that serves cooperatives across the country, offers a boost to those community efforts through the Sharing Success program. In the past, CoBank has matched up to \$5000 of donations to a maximum of two organizations per cooperative from a fund of \$4 million. When the COVID-19 pandemic delivered additional hardship to communities across the country, CoBank increased its Sharing Success fund to \$5 million, pledged to match up to \$10,000 in donations per cooperative, and expanded the number of organizations per cooperative to four. AzGT made use of this expansion with four different donations that totaled \$19,000 to the community.



*J.D. Wallace, AzGT communications, social media and marketing administrator (l), presents two \$2500 checks, one from AzGT and one from CoBank, to Joy Riley, president of the Benson Area Food Bank (center) and Jack Riley, operations manager of the Benson Area Food Bank.*

"We're not only investing in the teachers, we're also investing in the students," said Jacqui Clay, superintendent of Cochise County Schools and treasurer for Cochise Education Foundation (CEF). "And if you take care of the teachers, automatically, they're going to take care of the students. And, overall, that's a good thing for the whole community."

AzGT and CoBank have usually supported CEF with a total of \$3000 for its Teacher of the Year awards and its classroom mini-grant program, which gives teachers \$200 for classroom projects they normally cannot afford. The pandemic continues to impact how schools operate, and CEF needed funding for professional development for teachers to provide online learning as schools decide if and when to reopen classrooms. Therefore, AzGT and CoBank increased their total donation to \$5000 to help fund the additional need.



*J.D. Wallace presents two \$2500 checks, one from AzGT and one from CoBank, to Gary Clement, general manager of the Willcox Historic Theater.*

"With sincere gratefulness, we thank Arizona G&T Cooperatives and CoBank for their generous donation of \$5000 that's going to help our students, our teachers, and our communities move forward during this COVID-19 time in history," Clay said.

Willcox Theater and Arts also received a boost in donations. Its Matinee My Way program, which provides movies at lower volumes and with the lights on for those with challenges that prevent them from enjoying the traditional movie environment, has received the funds in the past. This year, AzGT and CoBank expanded their support from \$3000 to \$5000 to

the theater so that it can also fund its ArtsRageous program for youth and its Creative Aging program for seniors.

"As a theater in this town, I think it's a big thing. People don't have to drive an hour and a half or an hour and 45 minutes to the theater to watch first-run or second-run movies, and, we're not as expensive as the big boys are," said Gary Clement, general manager of the theater. "To be able to have AzGT and CoBank be able to help us help the community is a wonderful and great partnership."

Because of the pandemic's effect on the economy, AzGT expanded its assistance to the Benson Area Food Bank. Joy Riley, the food bank's president, explained that current demand is exceeding their ability to purchase food for their clients; therefore, they will provide gift cards to allow clients to purchase what they need. As with the three previous organizations, AzGT donated \$2500 and CoBank matched it so that the total donation was \$5000.

"We have seen an increase in traffic," Riley said. "You guys have a concern for the community and we're very willing to help with your donation. Without donations, we can't feed the people."

The fourth donation extends the life of something that serves children throughout Cochise County. The Ronald McDonald Care Mobile is used by Chiricahua Community Health Centers, Inc. (CCHCI), to provide pediatric dental services. However, the vehicle uses a generator for its electrical needs. AzGT and CoBank provided matching donations of \$2000 for a total of \$4000 to install a permanent power source, called shore power, from CCHCI's Benson clinic to the Care Mobile, which will reduce wear and tear on the generator.



*J.D. Wallace presents two \$2500 checks from AzGT and Cobank to Jacqui Clay, superintendent of Cochise County Schools and treasurer for Cochise Education Foundation (center), and Ben Reyna, outreach coordinator for Cochise County Schools.*



*J.D. Wallace presents two \$2000 checks, one from AzGT and one from CoBank, to Kate Maguire Jensen, president and CEO of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southern Arizona (center), and Dr. Brianna Hillier, DMD, director of dental services for Chiricahua Community Health Centers, Inc., for a permanent power connection for the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile in Benson.*

"In order to save our generator for those communities where we really need it, where we go to rural areas where there's no power at all, we're very fortunate to be able to plug in here, and that will be possible through AzGT and CoBank," said Dr. Brianna Hillier, DMD, director of dental services for CCHCI. "It's going to just prolong the Care Mobile's life that much more."

"These Care Mobiles are a half-a-million dollar investment, and so, whatever we can do to keep them running for the longest time possible is what we want to do, and the shore power is a step in that direction," said Kate Maguire Jensen, president and CEO of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southern Arizona. "It's really amazing that you all are funding really important things in your own community, and sometimes these amounts of money get overlooked. It's really important to spend money where you live. From all of us at the Ronald McDonald House Charities, I want to thank Arizona G&T and CoBank for this really incredible investment."

# Keeping the Lights On Sometimes Means Hiking up a Mountain for SSVEC Tech Team

By: Eric Petermann/SSVEC

For some who work for Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative, Dos Cabezas Mountain near Willcox, Arizona, is a rite of passage.

It's also the location of vital communication equipment for SSVEC and other agencies requiring the elevation provided by the 8,354-foot peaks to send a signal to remote areas in Cochise County.

When that equipment fails, or technicians receive alarms that something is wrong, it falls on the SSVEC Technical Services team to respond. It's a 24/7 job that requires scaling the mountain, usually carrying 100 pounds of tools and whatever may be needed to accomplish a repair.

An event this summer required the team to do exactly that.



Adrian Fuentes shows the pack that carries about 100 pounds of equipment needed to make repairs to communications equipment at the top of Dos Cabezas.

Technicians received an alarm that the temperature in the facility where the communication equipment is housed was above 110 degrees, indicating that there may be an issue with the air conditioning system.

"We try to keep the temperature around 74 degrees for our control houses which is sometimes challenging given the Arizona heat, so we knew we had to do something quickly," said Manny Gonzales, technical services and fleet manager at SSVEC.

He initially put out a call to rent the services of a mule, which would accompany staff members up Dos Cabezas carrying a 70-pound air conditioning unit and other equipment and tools.

Manny also checked the availability and the cost of utilizing a helicopter for the job.

"As it turned out, the helicopter was less expensive and a mule wasn't available, so we planned on flying to the top of the mountain to make the repairs."

The next morning, as two SSVEC technicians — Adrian Fuentes and Rafael Villegas — prepared to ascend



Rafel Villegas, left, and Adrian Fuentes, right, used straps and ropes to carry a 75-pound air conditioning unit, and a 100-pound pack of tools, to the top of Dos Cabezas to make repairs to communications equipment.



Ruben Nieto, electrical apparatus foreman, is the most recent member of the SSVEC team to join the "Dos Cabezas Climbing Club."



Fuentes, with walking poles, readies for the hike up the mountain.



Villegas takes the first turn at carrying a new air conditioning unit to the top of the mountain.

to the top of Dos Cabezas, the pilot of the helicopter determined that a fuel pump issue prevented the helicopter from carrying the technicians and equipment to the top of the mountain.

"At first, we were doing rock-paper-scissors to see which of us would get to fly up with the pilot instead of hiking up, but when the helicopter started having problems, neither of us wanted to fly," quipped Fuentes.

Without the services of a mule or an aircraft, the pair decided they could make the journey on foot, carrying the 70-pound air conditioner and needed tools up the mountain.

"It's a difficult climb both because it's steep and because there are lots of loose rocks and places where you can fall," Gonzales said.

Gonzales has made the climb numerous times, often serving as the human "mule" and carrying equipment and tools up the mountain, while accompanying another technician who would make the repairs.

Dos Cabezas, or "two heads" in the English translation of the Spanish name, is a focal point in the Chiricahua Mountain Range, about 20 miles east of Willcox. The wilderness surrounding the area includes rugged slopes, with a 19-degree elevation climb and peaks ranging from 4,080 to 8,354 feet at the top of the two "heads." The higher mountains and ridges offer long distance views of Sulphur Springs and San Simon valleys and numerous mountain ranges. There is also lots of wildlife.

Several developed and natural springs in the wilderness provide water for an abundant variety of animals, including bear, deer, mountain lions, eagles and many other species. In 2016, the Arizona Game and Fish department released photos of the second known jaguar living in the state.

For Fuentes and Villegas, there was a concern for rattlesnakes.

"We take walking sticks and probe the ground in front of us, as we step, to stir up anything that might be on the path. Right when we started the climb there was a rattlesnake near a rock, real close to where I was about to step," Fuentes stated.

Once at the top, the two SSVEC technicians determined the extent of the damage at the communications facility.

"The damage was caused by a bear that attacked the air conditioning unit possibly to get at the water caused by the condensation or to get to the moths that made a home in the filter of the AC unit," Villegas said.

After a successful trip up the mountain, the AC vendor accompanying Fuentes and Villegas installed the air conditioner, returning the temperature inside the structure to a much cooler temperature, and packed up for the return trip down the mountain.


"This is just something we have to do," Gonzales said. "Since Adrian and Rafael have made the climb, we've had to go up twice more, and the most recent time, Ruben Nieto made his first climb and has joined the club!"



Manny Gonzales, Tech Service and Fleet Manager, takes in the view during one of his many trips to the top of Dos Cabezas



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## Trico's COVID-19 Assistance Program is Helping Members, Local Community

Trico Electric Cooperative is committed to helping our members and the communities we serve as we face the health and economic challenges presented by the COVID-19 emergency.

In partnership with the Trico Foundation and the Trico Electric Charitable Trust, Trico has adopted a COVID-19 Assistance Program that provides bill credits to qualifying members who are negatively affected by this pandemic.

Qualifying members, including individuals and small businesses, can apply for bill assistance through a quick screening process that can be found on Trico's website. Trico employees then work with the members to review their documentation and complete the bill credit process.

In addition, Trico is providing funding for non-profit and charitable organizations that help local communities with COVID-19 related needs. Trico has now committed or awarded almost \$400,000 in COVID-19-related grants and member bill assistance.

Some of the organizations awarded grants include United Way of Tucson, Interfaith Community Services, the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, and Marana Health Care. Wildfire, formerly known as the Arizona Community Action Association, received a grant to assist Trico Members with their non-Trico bills and mortgages.

The Salvation Army, VFW Post 5990, Helmet Peak Volunteer Fire Department, Arivaca Coordinating Council, Arivaca Helping Hearts, Sahuarita Food Bank, Green Valley Assistance Services, Casas Adobes American Legion Auxiliary, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Tucson are some of the other Trico COVID grant recipients. Grant requests can be submitted at [www.trico.coop](http://www.trico.coop).

"As a non-profit, member-owned utility, putting our members first is a guiding principle that has never been more important than it is now," said Vincent Nifido, Trico's CEO and General Manager. "We will continue to support our membership and the communities we serve throughout this crisis."