



**LEFT:** Chuck Baucum, WCEC's right-of-way coordinator, stops by to inspect a clearing site where one of his teams is working. **RIGHT:** Tree Trimmer Zack Williams and Foreman John Pruden spend most of their days in different areas of our nine-county service territory as they work to clear rights-of-way. Cuco Santoy is in the bucket, as usual.

## Green and Safe Places Equal Happy Faces

Let's begin at the place where we all agree. Just like our members, those of us who work at Wood County Electric Cooperative (WCEC) admire both the natural and landscaped beauty of East Texas. We LIKE plants, trees, shrubs and flowers. Yes we do! In fact, it's one of the reasons many of us choose to live here. But, one of our biggest day-to-day challenges is striking a balance between the botanical treasures we all enjoy and safety, electricity reliability and finances. At WCEC, we are turning this challenge into an opportunity to educate all members about the costs associated with vegetation and tree management and the ways we can all work together toward the same goal.

Some of the principal contributors to electrical outages and blinks are trees and vegetation. Wind can sway branches into lines. Snow or ice—and even drought—can cause limbs to break or dip, causing outages. Additionally, wildlife will be more apt to hop onto power lines based on the proximity of a branch to a line. Safety is a major concern as trees, brush, vines and shrubs conduct electricity, which can cause fatal consequences. That's why WCEC maintains a 15-foot easement (30-foot clearance) on each side of power lines. This is not only our policy, but also follows federal and state guidelines that

help ensure electricity remains reliable and safe for all.

Various media accounts have lately depicted quite a few skirmishes near Dallas between residents that don't want their trees "massacred," and power providers that are attempting to maintain a safe clearance between limbs and power lines. Nothing seems to bring out hard feelings more than when a resident feels strongly about not wanting their trees trimmed or cut. That's why it's important for WCEC members to better understand the crucial nature of our right-of-way (ROW) clearing program.

WCEC has more than 4,700 miles of distribution line in parts of nine counties. It would be virtually impossible and absolutely unaffordable to clear all lines annually, so the work is done on about a seven-year cycle. However, the timing of this is very dependent upon many factors, with the prime considerations being weather and ground conditions. For example, if the ground is wet, crews have a difficult time placing the needed equipment for some jobs. So, unless it's an emergency, work in that region may be delayed until a more suitable season or time.

There is a substantial annual cost, about \$2.3 million, associated with regular ROW maintenance and emergency

## WOOD COUNTY ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

response clearing. To do the work, WCEC maintains three in-house crews consisting of nine men to operate the specialized equipment such as the timberjacks, chippers, bucket truck, log truck and tractor with brush shredder. Additionally, the standard procedure is to supplement these WCEC employee efforts with nine contractor crews that perform additional mowing, chipping and climbing to delimb trees. The supplemental crews help WCEC maintain an aggressive clearing schedule, while also keeping the program affordable.

As for the WCEC crews, just this last year, 39-year employee and Right-of-Way Coordinator Doug Dickerson retired from WCEC, but he left a well-styled ROW program that has served our members in good stead. (Hats off to you, Doug!) Now, Chuck Baucum, another longtime employee of 22 years—and trained by Doug—is leading and shaping this important program. Over the years, Chuck has received job-related training in all aspects of safety, ROW techniques and member relations, and he also is a member of the Utility Arborist Association. Chuck is backed by a team as thoroughly schooled as he, with most team members being long-term employees with specialized training in their respective job functions.

When crews do perform work, they trim and/or remove trees to maintain a good clearance around overhead primary and secondary lines. They also look for other hazardous conditions, like very large dead trees, that may be outside of the right-of-way but could fall and cause outages or damage to lines and equipment. It's important to note that our crews take every care to work neatly and protect property when performing their jobs; but in some cases where trees have been allowed to grow in close proximity to structures, WCEC may ask the property owner to sign a liability release.

Even with all of their training and skills, the WCEC ROW crews can't perform their work at peak efficiency

without the assistance, vigilance, cooperation and understanding of members. In particular, members should pay special attention when landscaping their property and only plant trees and shrubs in positions that will not threaten to infringe inside the right-of-way clearance that must be maintained. For primary distribution line, that clearance is 15 feet on both sides of the lines (30 feet total), all the way to the ground. For secondary line (the lines leading to your meter), four feet on either side of the lines, and to the ground, should remain clear.

One thing that many people fail to realize is the importance of keeping a clear path all the way to the ground under power lines. The reason is that if an energized line falls during a storm, it will energize whatever it comes in contact with, be it tree, plant, shrub, fence or living creature. The hazard also extends to fires, which can be caused by a live line igniting whatever it may fall upon. Importantly, objects and plants in the right-of-way greatly slow power restoration, as crews must move or work around any obstruction. Lastly, impediments to the right-of-way pose additional hazards to the crews.

Spring is always a great time for members to inspect their own property to see if trees, shrubs or other vegetation is growing near power lines. If so, we recommend that members consider relocating the plants that could eventually interfere with power lines. If a member does not want to move their plants, we understand. However, if at such time WCEC determines there is interference, we will either trim or remove them during regular right-of-way-clearing, and this process does not always leave optimum attractiveness. Trees may be topped or sheared on one side. So, for members who want creative control, it's best if they maintain their landscaping on a regular yearly basis to keep the shapes uniform.

In between the regular seven-year ROW clearing cycle



**LEFT:** Cuco Santoy spends his days in the air as an expert tree trimmer. Here he works from a bucket truck, but sometimes he must use his climbing skills for the tough spots. **RIGHT:** When you see this sign, our crews are hard at work for you, and they appreciate it if you "give 'em a brake" by slowing the speed of your car when passing.





**LEFT:** Tree Trimmer Roberto Guevara is an expert in his field and daily wields the chainsaw and does a fair amount of climbing. Foreman Gustavo Urbina spends his time running the timberjack, which is one of the most important pieces of equipment in the ROW program. **RIGHT:** Jason Johnson spends most days operating a tractor and mowing underbrush and also does quite a bit of chainsaw work.

that WCEC uses, there are continuous day-to-day events that need the ROW crew's attention. These include trees and limbs breaking and taking out, or threatening to take out, service. Many times the crew depends on WCEC members to alert them to these situations. The crew is always glad to get such information, and someone will go out and inspect—and then determine—the action needed.

One thing members need to understand when calling in a problem tree is that the ROW crew is primarily concerned with maintaining WCEC service, safety and the right-of-way. Sometimes members call us when they have a tree that is possibly a liability to their own house, barn or shed, but not to WCEC service. Unfortunately, we can't use WCEC resources to take the tree down—unless, of course, it is threatening power lines. And then we use our judgment on whether it's beneficial to WCEC to do any work on a tree. However, if we do determine that it will not benefit WCEC to remove a tree, if the homeowner decides to get the job done on his or her own and needs the line temporarily disconnected, we will do that.

Property access is also an area we'd like to ask our members to consider. Many times members have fenced and gated property that they lock. In emergencies, trying to gain access causes heavy crew delays, many times lengthening

the duration of a power outage. Members can help us with that by calling WCEC and updating their records. If a member has a dial or keypad combination entrance, we ask that they call us with the combination for our records. When members have chains and padlocks controlling access, we will cut that chain, adding our own padlock in addition to the member's. That gives us each controlled access and avoids delays, especially when there's a dangerous situation that needs to be addressed quickly.

About the WCEC ROW program, General Manager and CEO Debbie Robinson said, "Keeping all of our members safe, electricity reliable, and ROW costs and other costs affordable is a balancing act that we are delighted to perform. We are proud and true admirers of our unique ecosystem, but we also take our duty to our members seriously. Our ROW crew does a commendable and remarkable job, and their care is evident."

In summary, at WCEC we know our members like their trees, but we are also pretty sure that they enjoy having reliable and affordable electricity to power conveniences and necessities. We all want the same thing, and with preemptive planning, routine maintenance and good old-fashioned common sense, we can have both horticultural beauty and safe, dependable and affordable electricity.

## Need To Report a Tree Hazard?

If a member does wish to report a situation that warrants attention from our ROW crew, information is an essential part of a successful outcome. When calling our Member Services Department, the more information a member can relay helps our team target an issue and speeds response time. Some things to note include:

- Do you currently have power?
- If you do have power, are your lights dimming or flickering?
- If there is a limb or tree making contact, is it on the distribution line, or on the line from the main feeder to your meter?
- Is the tree limb causing electrical arcing or burning?



And Remember ...

## Always Dig Safe!

**W**hen landscaping or performing any work that requires digging, it's always important to know what's underground. Safe digging means calling 811 before each job to get your utility lines marked for free. Some diggers make risky assumptions about whether or not to get utility lines marked, but it's silly not to, when the service is fast and free. Why risk having a simple job like planting trees and shrubs, or installing a mailbox, fence, or deck turn into an inconvenience like a cut phone line or a major danger like a busted gas line or cut underground electric line? Digging without calling can cause injury, disrupt service to an entire area, and potentially result in fines and repair costs.

With a simple dial of three numbers, your call is automatically routed to a call center. Operators there will ask for the location of the planned dig and then route that data to all affected utilities. These utilities will then send workers to mark all underground lines so they can be avoided during the digging process.

The 811 number is a national "Call Before You Dig" phone number meant to simplify the process with an easy and memorable three-digit number. When dialed, it transfers the call directly to the Texas Excavation Safety System. Callers can also still dial the Texas System directly at 1-800-DIG-TESS (344-8377) or choose to simply dial 811.

## Easements and Rights-of-Way

Members of WCEC have granted easements to the cooperative that are composed of special permissions allowing WCEC to enter and perform certain functions on a member's property that has electric service provided by WCEC.

Easements grant the right, in part, for WCEC to maintain and inspect power lines and to cut and trim trees or other vegetation that, in WCEC's judgment, interferes with safe, reliable operations.

## Now, Let's Plant

Proper planting around power lines can greatly reduce or eliminate storm damage to them and minimize outages. The main rule of thumb is to respect the easement and place trees where limbs will never come in contact with power lines or transformers when they mature. Sometimes it's hard to imagine the future size, so that's why it's important to research tree varieties to determine their mature height and width. Also, after planting, it's important to inspect a tree each season to see how it's growing and to selectively shape and trim it. If done properly, this will maintain a pleasing shape and help avoid a drastic one-sided or flat-top look that happens when infrequent pruning is done on larger trees. Another benefit to pruning small amounts more often is the tree or shrub will be much healthier than if drastic cuts are needed.

We all recognize that trees add property value and enjoyment. They provide shade in the summer and protection in the winter, provide wildlife habitat, and work to clean our air. That's why members should plan landscaping well and perform preventive maintenance that keeps trees healthy and away from power lines. In the case of landscaping and power lines, the old adage is gospel: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

When planting new trees there's a great selection that are much more "power line friendly" because of the reduced reach and height. Some of those include the Carolina cherry laurel, dwarf crepe myrtle, flowering dogwood, fringe tree, Japanese maple, Mexican buckeye, Mexican plum, Texas redbud, Texas mountain laurel, Vitex and the yaupon holly.