

Kirk Gray Retires This Month

Kirk Gray, CEO and general manager of Graham County Electric Cooperative and Graham County Utilities Inc., retires this month. Assistant General Manager Phil Cook will take over.

Kirk began his career with GCEC/GCU in May 2010 as the finance manager. He took on the CEO/general manager position in February 2016, replacing Steve Lines.

While Kirk was finance manager, he pushed to build the Talley Substation without borrowing money. By using GCEC employees rather than hiring a contractor, the cooperative saved \$350,000.

When asked about the co-op's most significant accomplishment during his tenure, Kirk says electric rates have increased by only 2.4% since 2009. He is also proud the electric co-op has not incurred any long-term debt since 2011.

In the past eight years, GCEC has experienced a loss in electric sales due to municipal annexations of GCEC territory and installation of distributed generation.

Kirk and his wife, Cathy, owned and operated J. Kirk Gray P.C. Accounting firm for 17 years.

"Other than owning my CPA firm, the co-op is the longest I've worked in any other job," Kirk says.

He worked for several local businesses, such as Haralson's, Glenbar Gin and J.W. Martin,



ABOVE: Kirk Gray has presided over his last annual meeting. He is trading in his work clothes for golf clubs and a fishing pole. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Kirk has often played the part of Santa Claus for the co-op.

P.C. since coming to the Gila Valley 35 years ago.

Kirk was tasked with economic development for GCEC from the board of directors. He researched programs, and developed policy and procedures for funding interest-free loans at no cost to GCEC's members through the Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The first project funded through the REDL&G program December 2018 was the first of its kind in Arizona.

Through the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, GCEC acts as a funding conduit for approved projects. The benefit for GCEC membership is increased electric sales, which helps keep rates down for all members.

"It was a challenge worth

undertaking," Kirk says.

He accepts any type of challenge, always saying, "Don't tell me the reasons why we can't do it, tell me the reasons why we can do it."

GCEC past Board President Dennis Jacob says it's been a great experience working with Kirk through the years.

"As CEO, the ability to think outside the box and find creative ways to benefit the co-op has made it a pleasure to work with him," Dennis says. "May he enjoy his retirement years. I wish him the very best."

The sentiment from GCU Board President Jeff Larson is similar.

"I like his ability to think outside the box," Jeff says. "Just because it was not the way we always did it, Kirk was not afraid to look at a situation from a different approach. He was not afraid to plead his case before the Arizona Corporation

Commission when he felt that he had a good reason to feel the way he did about an issue before them. He was able to work with other people that he networked through."

Current GCEC Board President Reuben McBride says Kirk was concerned about the employees and wanted them to be successful and safe.

"He was a very pleasant person to work with, but expected everyone to do their job," Reuben says. "He will be sorely missed."

Kirk and Cathy have been married for 45 years. They plan on spending retirement golfing, hunting and fishing, and there will also be time to relax and travel. They have two sons, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild. ■

See related story on Phil Cook on page 8.



GCEC/GCU Under New Management

Phil Cook takes over as CEO

Beginning this month, Phil Cook takes over as CEO and general manager of Graham County Electric and Graham County Utilities.

Phil was hired last February as the assistant general manager.

“It’s a great opportunity to lead a cooperative such as Graham County Electric and Utilities that supplies essential services to our community,” Phil says.

Raised in the Gila Valley, Phil comes back home after working for the Central Arizona Project for 24 years.

“It will have its challenges as the industry is changing,” he says. “We need to keep rates manageable, through timely system upgrades, implementing technology and looking for efficiencies.”

With Arizona energy rules changing, regulated utilities will have to focus on new renewable-energy mandates.

Phil believes each manager is selected in a time when the business has a need.

“My strength is technology and predictive maintenance,” he says. “As the business environment changes, technology will be critical to the utility industry, and we need to adapt.”

Items of focus will be finding ways to be more efficient,

improving communication, reducing outages and planning for the future.

“After a fairly thorough talent search and interview process, Phil was selected to lead the cooperatives upon my retirement,” says Kirk Gray, retiring CEO and general manager. “Phil has the necessary skill sets and experience to lead the co-ops into a new era of renewable energy and technology. Phil is absolutely the right person for the job.”

Phil’s background in technology started when he entered the Marine Corps right out of high school. He lived in Safford through the seventh grade and moved to Pima, where he graduated.

After the Marine Corps, Phil graduated with a bachelor’s degree in business administration from Western International University. He worked at Phelps Dodge (now Freeport McMoRan) and worked at the Denver International Airport. He supervised the technical buildout of many technology systems that run the airport, including communications, fire protection, audio/visual and mobile data.

In 1996, Phil was hired at Central Arizona Project and held several positions before retiring as director of technology in 2019.

In 2018, he and his wife,



Becky (Boren), moved back to Pima where they both grew up. Phil continued to travel back and forth to Phoenix until retiring. They have three daughters, one son and one granddaughter.

When he is not working on home projects, Phil plays golf, and enjoys hunting, fishing and exploring this great place where we live.

If you see Phil in the office or at events, please welcome him to our co-op family. ■

Phil Cook brings a strong technology background to his new job as CEO and general manager of Graham County Electric and Graham County Utilities.



The 2021 annual meeting will look a little different than in past years due to COVID-19 safety measures.

GCEC Annual Meeting in February

Graham County Electric Cooperative’s annual meeting is scheduled for February 13 at the new Pima High School gymnasium.

As COVID-19 continues to plague the Gila Valley, social distancing, mask wearing and hand sanitizing will be observed to keep attendees safe.

This annual meeting is

for GCEC members to get information about the welfare and obstacles facing the cooperative. There will be a presentation about projects completed, future projects and financial soundness, along with many door prizes.

Director election ballots will be mailed during the week of January 18. As a member, you

have the right to vote for your board of directors. For those who attended the Graham County Utilities (gas and water) meeting in October, you know your voice can be heard. Send in your ballot promptly so your vote will be counted.

See you at the GCEC annual meeting Saturday, February 13, at 10 a.m. ■

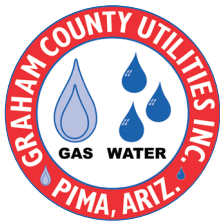
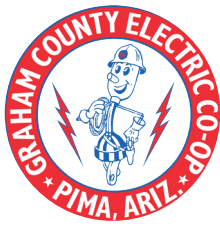
Washington Youth Tour Canceled

In November, Grand Canyon Electric Statewide Association decided not to participate in the 2021 Youth Tour, along with several other states. In December, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association canceled the event due to safety concerns for the students, chaperones and communities involved. GCEC thanks those students who applied and looks forward to participating again when it is safe.

Scholarships Available Through Graham County Electric Cooperative Foundation

If you are a high school senior living within GCEC/GCU’s service territory—whose household buys electricity, gas or water from GCEC/GCU—you are eligible to apply. If you have a financial need, have applied yourself in the classroom and have a strong desire to continue your education, contact your high school counselor for more information.

Wishing Members a Happy and Prosperous New Year



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Manager's Message

New Year, New Challenges

In 2020, we experienced a lot of changes and challenges, including COVID-19, masks, a hot and dry summer, and elections. We paid particular attention to the Arizona election results as the Arizona Corporation Commission had three out of five members up for election. The five-member commission sets rates and policies for electric, gas and water utilities, and oversees railroad crossings, pipeline safety and securities.

For several months, the Arizona Corporation Commission has been working on new energy rules that would change several requirements for regulated utilities. The new energy rules are more aggressive and will likely cause electricity rates to increase to meet the new requirements. The commission recently approved clean-energy rules mandating regulated utilities to get all of their energy from carbon-free sources by 2050. It will be some time before the ACC finalizes the energy rules, but it will require regulated utilities like GCEC to use more renewable energy.

To prepare for these changes, GCEC is pursuing energy alternatives that make economic and environmental sense. GCEC is constantly looking at projects that will provide our membership with safe, reliable and affordable



services. We will only proceed with projects that make economic sense, and take into account environmental impacts.

As Arizona's energy rules continue to evolve, we will also evolve and make changes to the way we manage the cooperative's systems. There are several technology projects scheduled to start in 2021 that will help improve the management of the electric and

water systems. Advanced metering infrastructure, automated meter reading, and supervisory control and data acquisition are some of the systems that will provide real-time information. This information and advanced control will

help reduce outages, automate manual processes, and improve system losses on both electric and water systems.

We are here solely to bring you safe and reliable electric/water services at a price you can afford. The GCEC directors, management and staff look after your interests as member/owners and thank you once again for your continued support as we prepare for future challenges affecting your cooperative. Happy New Year!

Phil Cook
CEO/General Manager