

Guardian Angels

Utility personnel go above and beyond to respond to community problems and help neighbors in need

By Pam Blair

Brent Wiltbank and Chris Lee had finished lunch and were making their rounds, patrolling Graham County Electric Cooperative power lines near Safford, Arizona, looking for trees encroaching on the lines and trimming them.

It was business as usual—until an unexpected flash from the front window of a home caught Brent's eye.

Thinking it could be a fire, the lineworkers turned back to check it out.

"The front room was on fire," Brent says.

A lighted candle had ignited the drapes. Fire had spread to a hutch and the carpet.

"Our timing couldn't have been better," Brent says. "The fire was just starting to spread into the walls and attic."

As Chris called 911, Brent grabbed the fire extinguisher from the cooperative's truck, broke the glass of one of the home's windows and put out the fire, saving the house.

"There were kids' toys in the yard, so we were concerned children could be inside," Brent says. "Both of us went in a little ways. The smoke was really thick, like you see in the movies."

They hollered to see if anyone was trapped in the house. No one answered.

"The best news is nobody was in there," Brent says.

Each month, the Graham

County Electric crew meets for safety training. One of the lessons was on how to use a fire extinguisher.

Brent remembered PASS, the acronym he had been taught for how to use a fire extinguisher: pull, aim, squeeze, sweep.

"You never think you will have to use the training," says Brent, who is now the cooperative's safety and loss control coordinator. "I took a brief second to think, 'Should I break out the window?' Thankfully, everything worked out well. The extinguisher worked great. The fire department made sure everything was completely out."

All In a Day's Work

Providing assistance to people in need is all in a day's work for utility personnel—especially those who work in the field. They are often the first to encounter someone in trouble, or to notice something does not look right.

Because of their work-related training, utility employees often are equipped to render assistance.

Sometimes the good deeds save lives. Other times, they simply provide comfort and evidence someone cares.

CPR and first-aid training have equipped utility employees to help people they encounter who are in the



Brent Wiltbank, loss and safety control coordinator for Graham County Electric Cooperative, in front of the house he saved from fire several years ago when he and a fellow lineworker were patrolling the power lines and trimming trees.

Photo by Kim Larkey

midst of medical crises—both on and off the job.

Among the "routine" aid offered is notifying police of accidents, fixing flat tires, jump-starting cars, providing gas and summoning help for stranded motorists.

Utility workers also have rescued animals.

Familiarity with people on their routes gives workers the desire and the opportunity to



Thank Your Linemen

Most of us can ride out a storm from the comfort of our homes. But while we hunker down, linemen put on their gear and brave inclement weather to restore power.

Although part of their job, it is another way utility personnel work to make sure you are safe.

April 8 was Lineworker Appreciation Day. Please let your linemen know you appreciate their hard work, sacrifice and commitment to keep on the lights and power. ■

Taking It in Stride

When it comes to kind acts and heroism, most employees do not want the spotlight to be shined on them, Brent says, noting they are just doing what they think is right and what they would want others to do for them.

“For the most part, the guys are humble and would tell you that anyone would do what they did,” Brent says. “Our job is to keep people safe. Usually that’s about electricity, but sometimes it isn’t.”

“Our guys lend a hand where they can—from people’s animals caught in fences to kids that get away from Mom and run out in the street.”

“The guys I work with are husbands and fathers—family guys. They care about human life and people’s property.

“We want to help, and it doesn’t matter if we have the uniform on or not.” ■

make a difference.

Some communities have formal gatekeeper programs, encouraging utility personnel to alert social service organizations to potential problems.

If something looks out of place or suspicious at a consumers’ home, utility employees call for help or leave a message for the owner.

“We’re in the neighborhoods all day, every day,” says Brent, who has worked at Graham County Electric Cooperative for 19 years.

Heroes on the Road

Several Plumas-Sierra Rural Electric Cooperative

employees have been beacons of hope—sometimes on the job, other times off the job.

Paul Erwin, who is based in Portola, California, arrived upon a rollover accident and radioed the office, which called 911. He stayed with the victims until the California Highway Patrol arrived.

Co-worker Joe Couto arrived on a rollover accident on a snowy, icy morning. A person flagged him down and asked for help. Joe turned on the vehicle’s emergency lights and radioed the office, which called 911. A person inside the vehicle was badly hurt. Joe kept

the person still and let him know help was on the way.

Justin Williams and Jason Harston were the first to spot a wildfire on Highway 70, close to Blairsden, California, that was threatening homes. They immediately called 911.

Even though it was the weekend, they headed to the office, retrieved the co-op’s small water truck and returned to the fire. They thought about trying to extinguish the fire themselves with shovels, but it spread rapidly. By the time they returned, emergency personnel were on the scene.

“These acts happen all the time,” Brent says.



Francyne Alva takes a turn putting out a practice fire with a fire extinguisher during annual employee training at Graham County Electric Cooperative.

New and Seasoned Employees Get Training

Safety is a priority at Graham County Electric Cooperative

Whether you are a new employee or a seasoned veteran of Graham County Electric Cooperative, all employees receive annual fire extinguisher training.

Francyne Alva, who started working March 18, had her first experience with a fire extinguisher March 21. After classroom instruction about fires and their chemical makeup, Safety and Loss Control Coordinator Brent Wiltbank took everyone outside to use the extinguishers. He teaches how to use the PASS method: pull, aim, squeeze, sweep.

Francyne says the inside and outside training was helpful.

“I had never operated an extinguisher before,” she says, noting it took her a couple of times to pull the pin out of the extinguisher. “I’m so thankful to have the opportunity to learn, in case I ever need to use it in an emergency.”

During new hire orientation, employees also learn about gas safety. Graham County Utilities Gas & Water Superintendent Wes Reidhead provided training on what to do when a member calls to report the smell of natural gas.

“I’ve already had my first experience in taking one of these calls,” Francyne says.

The member smelled gas coming from around her stove, so Francyne followed the safety instructions Wes taught her the week before. She followed all the steps, including calling out the

gas crew. They determined there was a leak in the stove.

“The member even called back and complemented the co-op and the crews,” Francyne says. “Everyone was very pleasant and helpful.”

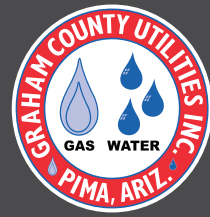
There could have been a completely different outcome, if the member had not reacted to the smell of gas.

Being the newest employee, it isn’t easy to learn everything all at once, but Francyne is used to multi-tasking and taking on new things. She worked in the human resources department at Haralson’s Tire and was a finance clerk, and a title clerk for Maverick Motor Sports and Trek R.V.

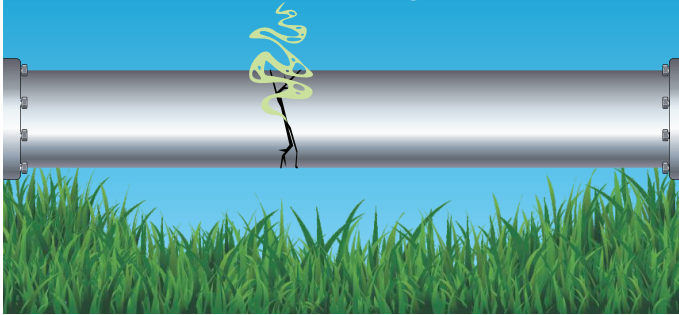
Francyne grew up in Greenlee County and graduated from Duncan High School. She is the mom of three children: two boys and one girl. She also has a grandson and a fiancé. She enjoys spending time with her family in the mountains, fishing and swimming. Her hobbies include watching movies. ■

GAS AND WATER MEMBERS: Mark your calendars now for the GCU Annual Meeting on Saturday, June 1, at 9 a.m. in the Pima School cafeteria. An update on GCU issues and accomplishments will be provided, as well as lots of door prizes.

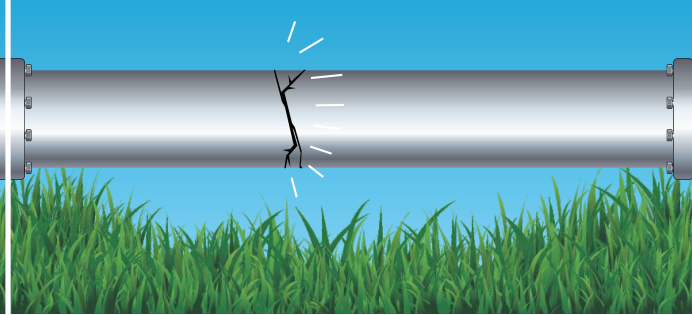
How to Recognize a Natural Gas Pipeline Leak



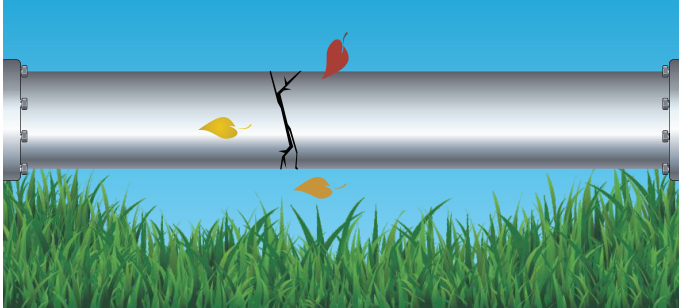
The presence of the rotten egg odor that is added to natural gas



A hissing sound



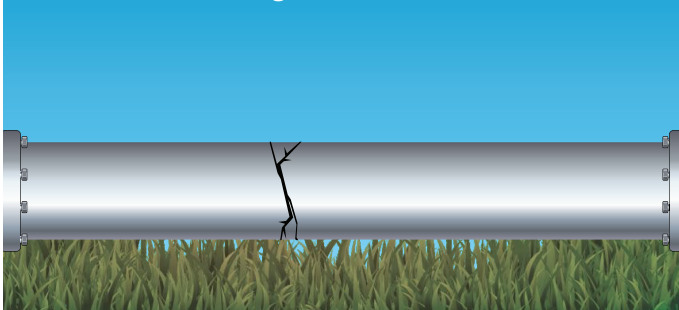
Blowing dirt, grass or leaves near a pipeline



Water bubbling or blowing into the air at a pond, creek or river



A patch of dead grass or vegetation in an otherwise green area



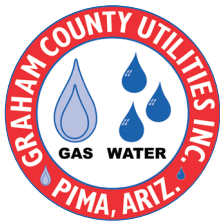
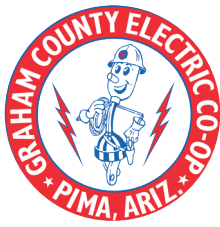
Flames coming out of the ground or burning above the ground



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Manager's Message

Conveniences of Life

With today's busy lifestyles, we sometimes take for granted the conveniences in life. Socioeconomic studies have directly correlated the availability of reliable, safe and affordable utilities with economic prosperity. We have come to expect that when we flip on the light switch, lights come on. When we open the valve on our water faucets, we expect water to start flowing. When we turn up our thermostat on a cold winter day, we expect that natural gas to flow into our heating system to warm our homes.

Do we really think about what it takes to deliver these modern conveniences of life? Graham County Electric and Graham County Utilities have more than a thousand miles of energized electric lines, natural gas pipelines and water lines, but the most important asset cooperatives have is our people.

On March 18, the nation recognized our gas and water crew with National Gas Worker Appreciation Day. On April 8 we recognized lineman with Lineman Appreciation Day. The week of April 22 through April 28 we recognized Line Locator Safety Awareness Week along with our meter department personnel. On April 24, we recognized Administrative Professionals Day.

We celebrated these days to recognize the dedicated employees of Graham County Electric and Graham County Utilities for their



hard work, their dedication to serving the membership and for their individual expertise associated with their positions.

We have a diverse group of employees who bring skills and expertise to their positions at the cooperatives. Our dispatch personnel and line crews provide 24/7/365 response to outages and emergency situations. Our meter department provides 24/7/365 assistance with line locates, meter connect and disconnect functions. Our administrative personnel provide information services, customer assistance and outage communications to our membership.

The next time you see or have contact with cooperative employees, I encourage you to simply tell them "thank you" for all they do to make our lives better.

The board of directors of Graham County Electric and Graham County Utilities thanks the employees for their work and dedication to providing safe, reliable and efficient resources to our members and communities. I would like to thank each and every cooperative employee for their contribution in fulfilling our mission statement, which states, "We are committed to provide safe, reliable and efficient resources to enhance the lives of our members and the communities we serve."

—Kirk Gray