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NINNESCAH RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

# Watts Ahead

## Ninnescah Rural Electric Co-op, Inc.

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### In Case of an Outage

If your electricity is off for more than a few minutes, please call 800-828-5538. The office hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday–Friday. After hours, calls will be answered by dispatch and forwarded to our on-call personnel.

## Save a Life: Avoid Distractions While Driving

Some temptations are hard to resist like that last piece of chocolate cake or binge watching the rest of your favorite show.

While driving, we typically hear that “ding” on our phone, alerting us to a text or call coming through, and we sometimes feel the urgent need to check it. We know we shouldn’t, but we reason that we’re going to make an exception — just this once.

So, why do we indulge in behavior we know to be wrong, dangerous and in many states, illegal? Call it hubris. According to AAA research, most people feel they are better-than-average drivers. After all, we have busy lives and are accustomed to multitasking. But mounds of research and thousands of deaths every year prove otherwise.

August is Back to School Safety Month. As a new school year begins with young drivers and school buses back on the road, I thought it would be a good time to remind folks, includ-

ing myself, of the dangers of distracted driving.

The reality is that using a phone while driving creates enormous potential for injuries and fatalities. Distractions take a motorist’s attention off driving, which can make a driver miss critical events, objects and cues, potentially leading to a crash.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, one of every 10 fatal crashes in the U.S. involves distracted driving, resulting in more than 3,000 deaths annually. This statistic is heartbreaking considering so many of these accidents could easily be avoided if we’d simply put down our phones while driving.

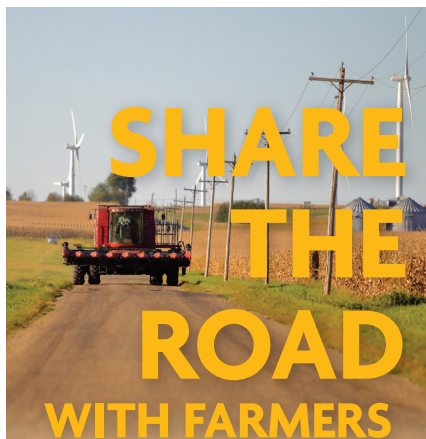
Distracted driving is considered any activity that diverts our attention, including texting or talking on the phone, and adjusting the navigation or entertainment system. Texting is by far one of the most dangerous distractions. Sending or reading one text takes your

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## PLAY IT SAFE. THAT TEXT CAN WAIT.



**If it's an emergency, pull over before answering the phone.**



Farming season means sharing the road with large farm equipment, which can be wide and slow. Public roads are often the only way to get from point A to point B.

When you find yourself following or meeting large farm equipment on the road, take a deep breath and do the following to keep everyone safe.

1

Be alert and cautious, and give farm equipment and other slow-moving vehicles space.

2

Do not pass in a "No Passing Zone," or where it is not safe to do so, such as intersections, bridges and railroad crossings, among others.

3

Make sure the tractor is not trying to make a left turn before you pass on the left.

4

Do not tailgate. Following too closely means you could be in the operator's blind spot.

5

Be careful when you do get the chance to pass. Oftentimes, farmers will move their equipment over when it is safe for them to do so.

SOURCE: TEXAS TABLE TOP (TEXAS FARM BUREAU)

## DRIVING BEHIND FARM EQUIPMENT: Do Your Part

Spring planting and fall harvest are busy times. Farmers and workers have big equipment and implements on the road. Navigating roadways can be dangerous for farm equipment operators and auto drivers who follow behind them.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 410 farmers and farm workers died from work-related injuries in 2019. Transportation incidents, which included overturned tractors, were the leading cause of death for these farmers and farm workers.

Follow these safety tips to make it safer for everyone involved.

### Equipment Operators

- ▶ Make sure all flashers and lights are operational.
- ▶ Drive as far to the right side of the road as possible when going around a curve.
- ▶ Pull over and allow vehicles to pass when traffic builds up behind you.
- ▶ Take care at railroad crossings.
- ▶ Avoid traveling during busy traffic times.
- ▶ Be mindful of the height and width of machinery, watching power lines, bridges and other hazards.
- ▶ Along with turn signals, use hand signals.
- ▶ Stay rested; do not drive when you are too tired or hungry.
- ▶ Keep a first-aid kit onboard in case of accidents or emergencies.

### Auto Drivers

- ▶ Give farmers plenty of room on the road. If a piece of equipment

takes up the entire road, pull into a driveway or area and wait for them to pass.

- ▶ Think about how long it will take to get to your destination and add extra time for busy farm roads.
- ▶ When passing, be sure you do so in a passing zone where there is clear visibility around farm equipment. Watch for oncoming vehicles.
- ▶ Go slow. Farm operators often stop or turn into fields. In addition, cars going at or over the speed limit can catch up to farm machinery quickly, since farmers in equipment move slowly.
- ▶ Do not assume that a farmer can move over in narrow areas — it is not always possible.
- ▶ Honk or motion when passing farmers. They may not see you or know you are there as their equipment is big and noisy.
- ▶ Do not tailgate; the farmer often cannot see you.
- ▶ Do not pass and then slow suddenly in front of equipment with implements behind it or farm trucks full of grain. They cannot stop quickly.
- ▶ Farmers make very wide turns. Give them plenty of time and room.

These are a few tips to make it safer for both the equipment operator and automobile drivers and to provide a more pleasant drive for all.

# Welcome New Members

Tams Freeze Dried Candy LLC – *Macksville*  
Troy N &/or Gina B Waters – *Macksville*  
Ross Stejskal – *Colby*  
Glen &/or Courtney Miller – *Quinter*

# Save a Life: Avoid Distractions While Driving Continued from page 12A ▶

eyes off the road for an average of 5 seconds. At 55 mph, that's like driving the length of an entire football field with your eyes closed.

In addition to refraining from texting while driving, we can help keep the roads safe by moving over for first responders and other emergency vehicles. Additionally, if you see util-

ity crews conducting work near the roadside, move over when possible and give them extra space to perform their work safely.

At Ninnescah Electric, safety is foremost in everything we do — for our employees and the members of the communities we serve. We routinely remind our crews of the dangers of dis-

tracted driving, and we hope you'll have similar conversations with your teens who may be new to the roadways and are especially susceptible to the lure of technology.

Let's work together to keep everyone safe on the roads. Remember: that text can wait and waiting just might save a life.

## Support Mental Health in Rural America

### The value of sharing lived experiences

Throughout many parts of the country, an increased understanding of mental health has led to enhanced awareness of its importance. A catch-all description of emotional, psychological and social well-being, mental health affects how people think, feel and act, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In fact, mental health is an important component of overall health. However, in some instances, there remains a gap between understanding mental health and embracing solutions, particularly in rural areas.

"When my 28-year-old nephew died by suicide in a farming community where mental illness was a subject never discussed, my mother courageously announced 'Enough is enough. We are going to talk about this, and we are going to talk about this in detail,'" said Jeff Winton, founder and chairman of the board of nonprofit Rural Minds.

His commitment to confronting suicide and mental illness in rural areas supports the goal of the organization, which is to serve as an informed voice for mental health in rural America and provide mental health information and resources. A major barrier to individuals seeking help in rural communities is the stigma often associated with mental health challenges. The organization is working to confront the stigma through people talking about their personal, lived experiences with mental illness.

Recognizing the value of sharing deeply personal accounts of mental illness is also the message of Jeff Ditzenberger, a farmer who attempted suicide. His own challenges confronting and managing his bipolar II disorder while

returning to farming motivated Ditzenberger to found TUGS, a mental health nonprofit with the mission to address the stigma surrounding mental health challenges and suicide.

Passionate about normalizing discussions about mental illness, Ditzenberger is working with Rural Minds to encourage others in rural areas to talk about their challenges with PTSD, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia or other mental issues. The goal is for people to become as comfortable with the discussion of mental health as they are talking about COVID-19, the common cold or the flu.

Mental health professionals agree that opening up about mental health challenges can be the first step to finding a path forward.

"Sharing the burden of mental illness and life experiences can be really, really powerful," said Dr. Mark A. Fry, consultant in the Department of Psychiatry and Psychology at Mayo Clinic. "As a psychiatrist, I would tell you it's a critically important part of the overall treatment plan. In my opinion, the concept of providing peer support — sharing lived experiences with mental illness and supporting each other — really is invaluable."

### Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Support in Rural Areas

While mental health is imperative for overall health, some people do not recognize mental illness as a disease; rather, it is sometimes perceived as a character flaw or personal weakness.

"Mental illness is an illness — just like cancer or diabetes," Winton said. "Just as it is with many other diseases, the person who is ill is not responsible for getting the illness. Much of the

stigma around mental illness may be rooted in the misdirected and unfair shame that can be an added burden for someone who is already suffering with a mental illness.

"Similar to many people in rural America, I grew up on a farm and was taught to pull myself up by my bootstraps and get over it, to just move on and to not think about it. Well, that is not an acceptable response to a mental illness. You don't do that with other illnesses. You can't do that with mental illness."

### Collaboration is Key

In the spirit of collaborating to better serve the mental health needs of rural America, Rural Minds is partnering with The National Grange, a family, community organization with roots in agriculture that was founded in 1867.

"Our aim in collaborating is to develop a grassroots, person-to-person approach to provide people who live in rural communities with mental health and suicide prevention information by working with local Granges, civic groups and community leaders across the country," Winton said.

### Help is Available

There are several established organizations that provide mental health information and services across the country, but Rural Minds focuses entirely on confronting the mental health challenges in rural communities.

Find a compilation of free mental health crisis resources and support and overall mental health resources and support at RuralMinds.org, which also offers access to recordings of educational webinars presented by the organization.



# Power Restoration: Lessons Learned from Line Crews

BY PAUL WESSLUND

Whether the lights go out because of weather or squirrels, safety comes first for lineworkers

You can learn a lot about power outages and restoration by watching, from a safe distance of course, a utility crew at work.

The first thing you'll notice is the deliberate, careful pace. They deploy signs to alert motorists. They mark the work area with orange cones. Always in hardhats and fire-protective clothing, anyone working on a power line pulls on heavy rubber gloves and spreads insulating blankets over the wires. Those gloves they pulled on have been tested by a machine that blows air into them to make sure there's not even a pinhole that could allow a deadly electric current to pass through.

And there's more you won't see. That morning, they likely huddled at the back of a truck to discuss what each of them would be doing that day, with an emphasis on safety. It's a best practice in the industry — so common it's often called a "tailgate meeting" or "tool-box talk."

## Making Safety a Habit

There are a lot of reasons your electric-

ity might go off, with weather by far the leading cause. But to a lineworker, all power outage repairs have one thing in common — safety.

Safety is common sense — people want to get home alive, after all. But it's also drilled into the utility workers. In their pole-climbing contests, the fastest time will get disqualified with the slightest safety misstep.

Co-op leadership makes it clear that skipping any safety measure or procedure is a firing offense. Line crews attend lectures aimed at driving home the importance of safety protocols.

So, if you ever wonder why restoring electricity after an outage can take a while, there's a good answer: line crews never compromise on safety.

The next thing you can learn from watching a line crew at work comes from seeing what task they're doing. There's a good chance they're replacing old equipment. Poles and transformers wear out, and failing equipment is one significant cause of power outages. The crew you watch might be restoring an equipment outage, or they might be switching out an old device to prevent a future outage.

You might see them replacing a downed utility pole, a painstaking process of removing the old and hauling in and raising the new, using trucks specifically designed for the job.

## Trees vs. Power Lines

The pole might be down because a motorist ran into it — another cause of outages. Or it could be weather related. Wind, ice, fires — these natural disasters cause about 80% of power outages. One characteristic of those natural disasters is that the damage can be widespread. If one pole is down,

lots of others could be as well. That means crews will be repeating the pole-replacement process, one job at a time.

That's why bringing the lights back on after a major storm with widespread outages can take days, or even weeks.

It's also likely the crew you're watching will be trimming trees. Trees are beautiful but a common cause of outages as wind and nearby branches can lead to wires getting knocked to the ground. Electric cooperatives devote a lot of time and resources to urging and enforcing limits on planting anything too close to power lines. And crews regularly set up to trim limbs that get too close to the wires.

One fairly common cause of outages you probably won't learn about by watching a crew make repairs is wildlife. Squirrels and other critters routinely crawl around utility equipment, occasionally making a connection between high-voltage wires. Snakes that slither into an electric substation bring consequences — for them and the utility. Sometimes crews need to investigate and correct the cause. Often the system will reset itself after only a brief power interruption.

Lessons from the lineworkers? Outages can be caused by a variety of factors. Restoring power is an intricate process in a complex utility system. And safety — for crews and the community — will always be the top priority.

**PAUL WESSLUND** writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives. From growing suburbs to remote farming communities, electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56% of the nation's landscape.

