



Lane Electric's community solar garden in Eugene has received strong support from members.

Photo by Zechariah English

Here Comes the Sun

Oregon electric co-ops lead the way in deploying community solar programs

By Ted Case

"It never rains in Autzen Stadium!"

Every Oregon Ducks home football game includes this iconic catchphrase, uttered by 55,000 die-hard fans who understand the irony of the statement. The game is, after all, in Eugene, which averages 50 inches of rain a year.

"It has nothing to do with the weather," said Don Essig, the Ducks' public address announcer. "The feeling you get when you walk in there, it's a sunny experience."

The same can be said now of Eugene-based Lane Electric Cooperative. In 2013, it conceived a landmark community solar project with Autzen Stadium-like optimism: hoping its members would sign up, and the sun would do its part.

So far, it has worked. On December 28, 2015, Lane Electric Co-op energized a 27.5-kilowatt, 84-panel solar garden at its headquarters.

"We have a number of members who like the idea of solar, but aren't able to locate an array on their property due to trees, buildings, topography—things that inhibit solar access," said Chris Seubert, Lane Electric's board president. "Now, through the solar garden, our members can take advantage of the sun's rays remotely. It's kind of like country living on city water."

Because they were in uncharted waters, Lane Electric waited until 50 percent of the panels were subscribed before moving ahead with the community solar garden. The co-op soon crossed the threshold. To date, 57 of the 84 panels are fully subscribed.

Lane's board was adamant about the project not being subsidized by the entire membership. The co-op took advantage of a variety of incentives to finance the project, including a \$25,000 grant through the Bonneville Environmental Foundation.

"Our hope is that now that there is concrete, steel and panels for our members to actually see,

we will fully subscribe the remaining panels and begin thinking about a phase-2 project,” said Dave D’Avanzo, Lane’s manager of member services.

A full panel subscription costs \$1,200, and subscribing to a half panel is \$600. Subscribers can finance the cost over 12 months on their electric bills. Subscribers can see a credit on their bill of \$3 to \$5 a month, depending on the availability of the sun.

The sun is usually not an issue 120 miles east of Eugene, where another Oregon electric co-op has launched an ambitious community solar project. But there were other challenges for Redmond-based Central Electric Cooperative.

Two years ago, after hearing a presentation on community solar, Central CEO Dave Markham and his board of directors decided it was important for Oregon electric co-ops to lead the way on offering renewable opportunities for their members. Markham tasked Central’s Member Services Director Jeff Beaman to spearhead the project.

Beaman navigated the seemingly endless regulatory and financial issues for what ultimately became a 200,000-watt, 700-panel solar farm at Central’s Bend field office. Like Lane Electric, Central’s solar project is funded only by those who participate.

Markham and the Central board decided to offer members an array of options. Central offers a “shared solar” program, granting members the output from a full, half, quarter or multiple solar panels. Each month, subscribers see a credit on their bill that equals the energy produced in the previous month.

Half of the 700 panels will be used for Central’s green power program. The program’s members choose to pay a premium on some or all of the electricity they use. While this program is not new, it is the first time it supports a project in Central’s service area.

Markham has been an outspoken advocate of community solar, which has caught the attention of the Oregon Legislature. He says the co-op’s project “demonstrates the transformation from a traditional energy structure toward a vision of the future.”

Beaman noted the project will be instructional in many ways.

“We’re proud that we’ve taken action to put it out in front of the members to see how renewables affect them,” he said.

Like Lane Electric, Central is aggressively marketing its community solar options. Beaman said the potential subscribers have different rationales.

“Some just think it’s the right thing to do,” he said.



“Others want it to pencil out financially.”

Even farther to the east, another Oregon electric cooperative—Umatilla Electric—has taken a different solar approach. The co-op broke ground November 2015 on a massive 1-megawatt solar installation along Highway 730, east of Umatilla. The project will generate enough power for 1,200 homes when it becomes operational this year.

Umatilla Electric CEO Steve Eldrige said the project will be owned collectively by all of the co-op’s 10,000 members, and will help the co-op meet the state’s renewable portfolio standard.

This is not UEC’s first foray into solar. It built a solar array on the grounds of its Hermiston office to learn more about the resource.

The 2016 Oregon Legislature will debate legislation to stimulate community solar programs, but lawmakers have taken note of what is happening in rural electric cooperative territory. Oregon’s electric cooperatives have strongly endorsed proposals that retain local control, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Rep. Paul Holvey (D-Eugene), a leading proponent of community solar, recently spoke at the Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative annual meeting.

“I certainly recognize and applaud what the co-ops have been doing in community solar,” he said.

If Rep. Holvey—an Oregon Ducks fan—has his way, the grand experiment by Oregon’s electric cooperatives may pave the way for future community solar projects across the state.

All is possible, it seems, when it never rains at Autzen Stadium. ■

Rep. Paul Holvey (D-Eugene) has recognized electric cooperative efforts to deploy community solar.

Photo by Jeff Beaman



Rep. Cliff Bentz listens intently to committee testimony. His legal training has made him a formidable debater in committee and on the House floor.

Photos by Lynn Howlett

'We Better Get it Right'

Using intense preparation, Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario) fights for the forgotten parts of Oregon suddenly thrust into the spotlight

By Ted Case

Visitors to Rep. Cliff Bentz's office in the state capitol encounter shelves stuffed with thick binders, and white boards filled with graphs indecipherable to anyone but a Nobel Laureate.

The office—a testament to Bentz's unrelenting thirst for information—has left more than one advocate scrambling to sharpen their arguments.

"When you go in there," one lobbyist observed, "you better know your stuff."

Bentz's well-known proclivity to dive deep into policy minutiae has put him at the forefront of two of the Oregon Legislative Assembly's signature debates

in the February session: dramatically raising the minimum wage and phasing out "coal by wire" for the state's investor-owned utilities.

His arguments may not always carry the day, but as witnesses before his committees will attest, Bentz is going to get answers to his questions.

Nothing frustrates Bentz more than implementing policy without knowing the true cost to those in his sprawling House district that is larger than West Virginia.

"Cliff is unbelievably committed to Eastern Oregon," said Werner Buehler, CEO of Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative, which serves several

counties in Eastern Oregon. “His family’s roots run very deep.”

Bentz grew up in Drewsey, and his family has two ranches in Harney County. He knows the land and he knows the people, but he never expected both the land and the people would become center stage in a national argument over federal grazing policy.

The well-documented 41-day occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Harney County outside of Burns dominated Bentz’s time in the run-up to the February legislative session.

Suddenly, a place few could find on a map became a flashpoint for federal land management policy.

“People were unaccustomed to the limelight,” Bentz said. “It’s been a challenging time.”

He spent countless hours talking to his constituents, many of whom he dealt with in his other life as a lawyer dealing in agriculture and water law.

Bentz regrets that many of the good things the local residents deserve accolades for—on issues such as Endangered Species Act mitigation—have been overshadowed by the outsiders who occupied the refuge.

Bentz also has focused attention on a high-profile issue that has far-reaching consequences for his rural district: a dramatic increase in the minimum wage.

As always, Bentz went beyond traditional small-business arguments, reading dense economic studies to fully understand the ramifications of a minimum wage approaching \$15.

His conclusion: “This proposal, far from helping low-income people, will damage all of Oregon,” he said.

Randy Whitaker, manager of Harney Electric Cooperative in Burns, says Bentz fully appreciates how legislation that may fit the Willamette Valley will not work in remote parts of the state.

“He knows it’s not a one-size-fits-all because he’s spent so much time out here,” said Whitaker.



Rep. Bentz confers on the House floor with Rep. Deborah Boone (D-Cannon Beach).

Bentz also serves on the House Energy and Environment Committee, which has jurisdiction over HB 4036—legislation crafted by investor-owned utilities and renewable energy advocates after a ballot measure was filed to wean Oregon off coal-fired generation.

Bentz has questioned the approach and whether policymakers adequately understand the true impact.

“If China doubles their coal, have we really done anything?” Bentz asked on Oregon Public Broadcasting’s “Think Out Loud” radio program.

His chief concern, Bentz says, are irrigators, food processors and small businesses that are the economic engines in Eastern Oregon.

“Once we’re committed, the ratepayer will have to pay for it,” Bentz said. “We better get it right.”

The quest to get it right compelled Bentz to introduce a climate metrics bill that creates a program to assess net impacts of state policies and programs for reducing greenhouse gases.

In his view, if the Oregon Legislature

is going to implement climate policy, the state should understand the estimated cost incurred by each resident.

Bentz admits the legislation is a work in progress, but then again, work does not dissuade him. During the session, he is 400 miles away from home. He occupies a place where there are no distractions other than work. There is always one more issue to research, binder to study or lobbyist to question.

One of his colleagues, Rep. Sherrie Sprenger (R-Scio) credits Bentz for helping her through her frustrating early days on the House Revenue Committee.

“I had to constantly remind him to keep the discussion at 30,000 feet,” she said. “He knew the subject matter so well.”

Another Republican colleague in the House of Representatives called Bentz the “hardest-working guy in the legislature.”

In his office, Bentz shrugs his shoulders at the compliment.

“I’ve spent my whole life getting to this point,” he said. ■

The tower on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge posed safety issues for Harney Electric crews if they were ordered to shut off the power.

Photo by istock/
garytmarsh



The Tip of the Spear

Randy Whitaker and Harney Electric Co-op played a behind-the-scenes role in a spectacle that captivated the nation

By Ted Case

There is nothing like an armed siege to mess up a retirement announcement.

Retirement was what Harney Electric Cooperative Manager Randy Whitaker contemplated as the calendar turned to 2016. He has managed the Eastern Oregon-based cooperative for nearly 15 years, capping off a 40-year career in the utility industry.

Not that providing electric service to the approximately 1,100 meters scattered

throughout a service territory roughly the size of West Virginia doesn't provide challenges.

Summer range fires have scorched his poles and wires, threatening reliability for members.

The potential listing of the sage grouse as an endangered species threatened to destroy an economy almost built entirely on ranching. While Whitaker is a man of few words, he was outspoken about the cost of the Bureau of Land Management's plan to bury power lines for the benefit of the sage grouse.

The day after New Year's 2016, however, was like nothing Whitaker has ever experienced.

That Saturday, Harney Electric's operations manager, Brent Beverly, informed Whitaker that militants had taken over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge to protest the imprisonment

of local ranchers Dwight and Stephen Hammond. Suddenly, Whitaker's retirement announcement took a back seat to an acrimonious battle over the role of the federal government managing grazing land. Whitaker knew immediately his small electric cooperative would be on the front lines.

"Law enforcement is going to want to shut the power off," Whitaker told Beverly. "What would it take to do that?"

The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is on a hill with a 75-foot observation tower that looks like something from a prison camp. There are several electric meters on the refuge property.

Beverly told Whitaker they could cut the power on-site, they just couldn't do it safely. Sending a lineman onto the refuge was risky. The tower provided a great line of sight for the militants armed with high-powered rifles and a spotting scope.



Harney Electric Manager Randy Whitaker said the occupation was a “localized emergency far different than what we had ever come across.”

With the occupation barely underway, Whitaker decided to play the waiting game. He didn't have to wait long. Two days later, the FBI came by his office, and they had some questions.

Whitaker cooperated with the special agent who wanted information on electric service to the refuge. The FBI, however, was not at liberty to discuss operational specifics. There was no request to cut the power, though Whitaker was candid about his concerns for his employees' safety.

Whitaker's gut reaction about the occupation was correct: Harney Electric was, in his words, “the tip of the spear” in an event captivating the nation.

For most Americans, the occupation was a spectacle dominating the nightly news. For Whitaker and his board and employees, it was a “localized emergency far different than what we had ever come across,” he said.

As news crews descended on Burns, Whitaker and his board knew they needed a media strategy. They are connected to Gallatin Public Affairs—a well-respected consulting firm in

Portland—who warned that news outlets would show up at their office, asking when they were going to shut off power.

“Don't give them an inch,” the co-op was advised.

Almost immediately, journalists called and stopped by the co-op office seeking information.

Harney Electric's plan was to keep a low profile. Whitaker and the staff referred all calls to the sheriff's office. To appear as though they were choosing sides could destroy the co-op's credibility—or worse, put his employees in harm's way.

The press was not the only group that surmised electricity could be a bargaining chip in the occupation. After several days, Whitaker received a call from one of the militia asking—rather audaciously—that the refuge account be switched over to their name. Whitaker played it straight, telling them they would need to sign a membership form and be able to show proof of ownership of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The conversation soon ended.

The occupiers moved freely throughout the community, and tension mounted. More militia came to town, and it was not uncommon to see them in Safeway with pistols strapped to their hips.

Harney Electric staff constantly updated their action plan as the situation became more surreal. Strange cars started showing up in their parking lot, and Whitaker believes there were times he was followed as he drove through town.

As speculation ran rampant about the cooperative's role in ending the standoff, Whitaker and his board debated whether to move their operation to a field office out of concerns for employees' safety.

“When are you going to turn off the power?” was a common refrain. But the general public had no idea how complicated the idea of turning off the power had become, if law enforcement agencies forced the issue.

Because they could not safely enter the refuge property, Harney Electric crews would have to cut power to a tap line a

few miles away that supplied the refuge with electricity—along with six other Harney Electric members. Temperatures in Harney County often fell below zero, and Whitaker made sure the FBI knew he had an obligation to keep his members from freezing.

While Whitaker cannot reveal many details of his discussions with the FBI, providing the other members with standby generation was on the table.

“There were innocent Harney Electric members who would be hurt,” Whitaker said.

After several weeks, law enforcement officials changed their tactics, arresting the leaders and killing one militant in the process. Soon, only a handful of protesters remained on the refuge and the standoff ended in a bizarre but peaceful fashion.

Whitaker is tight-lipped about Harney Electric's role in the final days of the occupation, but acknowledges he spoke to roughly 10 different FBI agents on a range of legal and operational issues.

The inquiries still come, this time in the past tense.

“Did you ever turn off the electricity?” he is asked.

Whitaker, a man who spent a career letting his actions speak louder than words, shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “We never did.”

At about the time the siege ended, Whitaker officially announced his retirement. In a letter to his board, he wrote, “It is time to relinquish the reins to someone else.”

But for 41 days, he held the reins for one of the most bizarre events that can confront an electric cooperative, though he takes little credit for steady-handed leadership that kept his employees safe and his co-op out of the headlines.

This August, he will retire to do things “before it gets too late in life in do them,” he says. He will hunt, fish and tell his grandchildren about the occupation at the refuge. It is an amazing story, except for just one thing. They probably won't believe him. ■

Bringing Energy to the White House

Northwest energy experts analyze Clinton and Trump on energy policy

By Ted Case

The 2016 presidential campaign has focused on many things: building high walls along the Mexican border (and making Mexico pay for it), reining in Wall Street, income equality and “making America great again.”

The campaign has had little to do with energy issues in the Pacific Northwest which—although vital to the region—are not sound-bite issues that drive national campaigns.

But history has shown that the presumptive nominees, if elected, will not be able to ignore them.

It appears likely that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and billionaire developer/realty TV star Donald Trump will be the standard bearers for the Democrats and Republicans, respectively. While their positions on Pacific Northwest electricity issues are not fully developed, each candidate has laid down a marker on electricity issues.

With respect to more comprehensive energy policy, Clinton has toed the clean energy line, espousing a national goal of 500 million solar panels installed by 2020. She also has set a goal of the U.S. generating enough renewable energy to power every home in America.

Trump’s energy policy has largely centered on curtailing the power of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and support for further deployment of nuclear energy.

“I’m in favor of nuclear energy, very strongly in favor of nuclear energy,” he said.

Because of the Bonneville Power



A Northwest energy lobbyist said Donald Trump is a “total wild card” on the Federal Columbia River System.

Photo by Christopher Halloran/Shutterstock.com

Administration’s importance to the Pacific Northwest economy, every administration has faced thorny issues such as fish and wildlife mitigation, infrastructure development, renewable energy and even the hot-button issue of whether the agency should be privatized or dams breached.

A President Clinton or President Trump undoubtedly will face the same challenge.

Already the speculation has begun among energy experts, lobbyists and congressional staff about how the presumptive nominees may view the complex array of issues involving the Bonneville Power Administration—the agency that markets hydropower from the 31 dams in the Federal Columbia River System. Some were willing to speak on the record for this article, while most preferred not to be

identified in order to speak candidly.

Marty Kanner, a well-respected Washington, D.C., energy lobbyist with clients in the Pacific Northwest, has been closely watching the presidential race. From his vantage point, clues on how each candidate may address Northwest energy issue can be found in their prior experience.

“Donald Trump is a big supporter of infrastructure,” Kanner said. “We could see a wave of historic investments, if he views the investments to be an appropriate taxpayer expenditure.”

Although Secretary Clinton did not serve on the Senate Energy Committee during her tenure in the Senate, Kanner believes she “has a tangential understanding of hydropower through her experience with the New York Power Authority.”

But it is Clinton’s time at the State



Hillary Clinton's energy agenda has focused on installing 500 million solar panels by 2020.

Photo by JStone/Shutterstock.com

Department that could be more significant experience.

The Columbia River Treaty, which is due to be updated, is an agreement between Canada and the U.S. that guides operation of the water resources in the Columbia River Basin for flood control and power needs.

According to public power advocates, the treaty is grossly imbalanced in favor of Canada. Kanner believes because of her time at the State Department, Clinton should be familiar with the treaty and the key players involved in the negotiations.

Not surprisingly, Trump elicits the most speculation from the experts.

"He's a total wild card," said a public power lobbyist who has worked both in the region and Washington, D.C. "I assume he'll roll back all the Obama Administration initiatives such as the

Clean Power Plan."

A senior congressional staff member with ties to the Northwest said Trump would have the steepest learning curve.

"He has no knowledge or depth on these issues," they said. "He probably hasn't even heard of these agencies."

Another high-ranking Republican staff member said he believes privatization of the power marketing administrations "would definitely be on the table" under Trump.

Through the years, there have been many proposals to sell the power marketing administrations and divest the federal government from its power marketing functions. The last serious proposal came in 1995 when President Bill Clinton proposed to get the federal government out of the electricity marketing business, exempting BPA largely because of opposition from

powerful senators such as Mark Hatfield.

The proposal to sell the three other power marketing administrations went nowhere because of backlash from consumers and sportsmen worried they would lose access to multipurpose dams.

U.S. District Judge Michael Simon recently put the issue of breaching dams back at the forefront when he ruled against the federal salmon plan, unwinding years of collaboration among federal agencies, Northwest states, tribes and other stakeholders. Simon's ruling stated that further action may well require consideration of removing one or more of the four Lower Snake River dams.

Dam breaching has been a hot button in presidential campaigns, with George Bush hammering Al Gore over the issue in the 2000 election.

While it may appear on its face that Secretary Clinton could support dam breaching, a senior Energy Department official stated, "Hillary Clinton will look beyond environmental dogma and see some real value in the Federal Columbia River System."

Of course, these decisions are not made in a vacuum. Whoever is elected president undoubtedly will rely on the Northwest congressional delegation to help them navigate through the regional power issues that take years to master.

For an election that has produced more heat than light, it is the highly nuanced policy issues that can make or break an administration.

And most all of the experts consulted for this story recommend that Clinton and Trump tread carefully. As one lobbyist stated, "Destroying ISIS is a cakewalk compared to understanding Northwest energy issues." ■

Reliable to a Fault

Now 75, Salem Electric always has been a different kind of cooperative

By Ted Case

Salem Electric's annual meeting is a bit different than those at a typical electric cooperative.

Rather than a Saturday big-tent affair with barbecue and raffle tickets, the meeting is a low-key gathering with cookies, held upstairs at Roth's supermarket in West Salem on a Tuesday evening. Attendees tend to be parents of the students receiving college scholarships, along with the cooperative's most ardent followers, including 90-year-old Louie Sansing, who lives on a quiet residential street nearby.

The absence of crowds and balloons doesn't reflect the deep reservoir of support for the cooperative in places it serves: West Salem, Keizer, Northgate and small portions of downtown Salem.

However, there are other barometers of success.

It is perhaps fitting that Salem's annual meeting is different, as the cooperative is unlike any other in the state—and perhaps the entire rural electric program.

Like many cooperatives established in the halcyon days of the Rural Electrification Administration, Salem Electric is celebrating a 75-year anniversary in 2016.

Manager Terry Kelly starts his annual meeting speech May 10 by briefly reviewing the history of Salem Electric, including the compelling story of Harry Read, the owner of a local radio station who approached Portland General Electric in 1938 to see if he could get a discount on his electric bill. He was rebuffed.



Salem Electric Manager Terry Kelly calls his co-op's employees "innovative" and "forward-looking."

Photos by Michele Adkins

"It was an upsetting event for Harry," Kelly says.

It was so upsetting that Read started his own cooperative in West Salem.

Other Oregon electric cooperatives recently have celebrated their 75th anniversaries, but that is where the similarities end.

West Salem and Keizer look nothing like the dense forested areas of Western Oregon's electric co-ops or the endless rangelands of those across the mountains. Harney Electric in Eastern Oregon serves a vast 20,000-square-mile territory—larger than many states on the East Coast.

Salem Electric serves approximately 18,000 members across 17.5 square miles.

"We may have a small geographic footprint," Kelly says, "but our aim is to have a big impact in the communities we serve."

A compact, largely residential service territory certainly makes it easier to keep the lights on, but Salem Electric has taken reliability to another level.

"The original vision of (former Salem manager) Jere Overs was to be the most reliable electric utility in the industry," says Salem Electric Board Chairman Joe Van Meter. "That vision has continued

through Bob Speckman and now, Terry Kelly. We can have an entire month without even a blip in service.”

Statistics back this up. Salem Electric’s outage time per member averaged just more than 16 minutes during the past decade—an almost unheard of level of reliability in the electric utility industry.

For Kelly and his team, the engineering aspects for this level of reliability—redundant service and remote switching, for instance—are only part of a larger philosophy.

“Our members expect this of us,” Kelly says. “Our goal is to keep the power on.”

The self-effacing Kelly took over the co-op’s top job in 2014 and has been at Salem Electric for 33 years—part of a remarkably stable workplace.

In an era of employee churn and rapid turnover, the average service of Salem Electric’s 49 employees is 15 years.

“We have a tremendous staff that cares about and involves our members,” says Alicia Bonesteele, a Salem Electric board member and longtime community leader.

But now, Kelly tells the annual meeting crowd, this tenure is forcing change.

“Salem Electric,” he says, “could see half of our employees choose retirement over the last five and next five years.”

Kelly and his board are well aware of what the loss of this historic knowledge can have on a utility known for its rock-solid stability. They are investing in a career development program to meet the future.

“We view this turnover as an opportunity and not a challenge,” Kelly says.

Each annual meeting, a select group of Salem Electric employees are invited to describe their jobs. It is an opportunity to take center stage, if only for a few minutes. They take obvious delight in the opportunity.



Salem Electric was created by radio station owner Harry Read, who was disenchanted with Portland General Electric’s service. According to statistics, the co-op’s 49 employees have taken electric reliability to a new level.

In 2016, the four individuals selected have diverse jobs, ranging from engineering to accounting to cybersecurity. They are linked together by their enthusiasm and a headquarters building across the street that is a throwback to an earlier era, when customers actually came through the front door for service.

Despite advances in automation, Salem Electric has extensive foot traffic. Up to 3,000 people a month visit the office.

Kelly says these personal interactions—a byproduct of their reputation in the community—provide more opportunities to talk about the co-op and its programs.

A member who comes through the door to talk about heating assistance may be connected with energy-efficiency personnel, creating what Kelly calls a “one-stop shop” for energy services.

Because of this acute attention to detail, Salem Electric has few write-offs and even fewer disconnections.

What Salem Electric is doing outside its doors is also evident at the annual meeting.

Along with an active employee presence supporting the United Way and

serving on other nonprofit boards, Salem also provides 10 \$1,000 college scholarships for local high school graduates. Many of these scholarship recipients attend the meeting, their parents beaming as the students nervously tell the crowd their plans for the future.

After 90 minutes, the Salem Electric 75th annual meeting concludes with cookies still on the plate.

Next year—the co-op’s 76th anniversary—there will be little talk of history. But there will be another batch of graduates receiving scholarships and a new slate of employees to speak with pride about their jobs.

It is also a good bet the lights will barely flicker during the course of the year for those Salem Electric members who choose not to attend.

But they will most likely share the perspective of 90-year-old Sansing, who wouldn’t miss a meeting. He is not only a Salem Electric member, but a retired utility executive who, after managing electric cooperatives throughout the world, is still partial to his local utility.

“Salem Electric,” he says, “is the best.” ■



Lonnie Rainville is the operations officer of Umpqua Indian Utility Cooperative—and a tribal member.

Photo by Cheryl Rainville

Lucky Number Seven and Much Hard Work

The Umpqua Indian Utility Cooperative is a unique entity, much like the tribe it serves in Southwestern Oregon

By Ted Case

It's a long way from the old bingo hall.

The Seven Feathers Casino Resort is hard to miss as it emerges from the curvy, tree-lined landscape along Interstate 5 near Canyonville. The bingo hall started by the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe in 1992 is now one of Southern Oregon's premier resorts, with a 68,000-square-foot gaming area, high-end restaurants and a luxurious spa.

Visitors entering the casino are treated to Skookum Hyak, the world's largest bronze casting of an eagle.

But there is a lot more to the Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe than table games and bronze

castings. In the 1800s, the tribe lived between the Cascade and Coast ranges in Southwestern Oregon, and along the South Umpqua River and its feeder stream, Cow Creek.

They were a mobile and highly resourceful tribe, but survival became difficult in the 1850s when miners descended upon their land after gold was discovered. Epidemics swept through their villages, killing members of the tribe, including their chief.

Tribal members were disbursed by settling homesteaders, but seven families continued traditional ways, meeting throughout the years to celebrate and honor their traditions.

The Seven Feathers Casino Resort is named after the families that kept the traditions alive.

Today, after a protracted battle with the federal government, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians is one of nine federally recognized Indian tribal governments in Oregon.

The tribe's rich tradition of hard work and innovation is not only alive, it is thriving through several tribal businesses that are not as visible as the

resort. Among other ventures, the Cow Creek Tribe operates a truck and travel center, a ranch and a motel. Its 26-acre Seven Feathers recreational vehicle resort is one of the few RV parks in the country to receive the coveted “10-10-10” highest rating by Sam’s Club.

Through these enterprises, the tribe controls its own destiny by providing jobs, health care and education for its members, aided by one of the most unique utilities in the Pacific Northwest: the Umpqua Indian Utility Cooperative.

The year 1992 was not only an important year for the advent of the bingo hall, it was the same year Congress passed the Energy Policy Act, which included a provision allowing tribes to form their own utility if they met certain criteria.

The Cow Creek Band was interested in forming a utility to keep its costs down, to exercise the tribe’s sovereign rights, and because existing water and sewer utilities limited their ability to expand.

On the electric side, the tribe was interested in gaining access to renewable and affordable hydropower marketed by the Bonneville Power Administration. As a customer of Pacific Power, they had to create a public or cooperative entity to receive the benefits of BPA power.

UIUC was formed in October 2001 and began serving the wholesale electrical loads at the casino and truck stop. It is one of only two tribal utilities in the Northwest. The other serves the Yakama Nation in Washington.

“It made sense on a number of fronts,” says Lonnie Rainville, general manager of UIUC.

Rainville, who is also a member of the Cow Creek Tribe, went to high school in nearby Myrtle Creek and finished his degree at Western Oregon University before returning to work with the tribe in human resources. He took over the utility position in 2014, leading a group of 14 people who are involved in what Rainville calls a “three-pronged utility” with water, wastewater and electric services.

The tribe has seen significant cost savings from forming its own utility. Since 2008, the tribe has saved more than \$1.6 million on both potable water and wastewater. But UIUC’s savings on the electric side has been particularly notable—more than \$13 million since 2008 by buying their electricity from BPA instead of higher-cost Pacific Power.

Unlike its counterparts in Washington, the Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe has no reservation and actually has more members outside



of its historical area. While the tribe relies on traditional Oregon industries such as agriculture and timberland, Rainville says UIUC seeks to help diversify their economy by “evaluating what more we can do with our utilities.”

UIUC’s electric distribution system—which is all buried underground—not only serves the energy-intensive casino, but a small data center and some commercial buildings.

Through all of these ventures, Rainville says the focus remains on the nearly 1,750 members of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe, including programs to enhance economic opportunities and keep their heritage alive.

Education has been an important component of this assistance.

“If a tribal member wants to go to college,” Rainville says, “it’s our mission to help.”

While Rainville clearly takes pride in what the tribe has accomplished, there are other projects on the horizon. Just as the tribe was highly mobile and resourceful two centuries ago, there is a sense that UIUC must continue this tradition of self-reliance by finding innovative solutions.

They may operate a casino, but for a tribe that has had to battle for survival for centuries, they are not counting on luck.

“We’re always improving what the tribe can do for our membership,” Rainville says. ■

This July, Seven Feathers Casino Resort hosted the Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s summer meeting.

Photo by Ted Case