

Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Somerset REC

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Guest Column



More homes powered by the sun

By Emily Baer

ON APRIL 22, one of the world's largest civic events, Earth Day, will be celebrated. Eleven members of Somerset REC are already participating in this global movement by having solar panels used to produce clean energy on their property. Over the last six months, the number of members inquiring about solar panels has nearly quadrupled. Some members are interested in residential solar panels while other members are being approached by leasing agents interested in installing solar panels on retired farm ground. The co-op's position on solar panel installation is simple: we are neutral on this topic.

I would like to review our Alternate Energy System (AES) guidelines for a residential solar panel interconnection with Somerset REC and Allegheny Electric Cooperative. Somerset REC is your electric distribution co-op. Allegheny is the co-op that procures electricity for all 13 Pennsylvania distribution cooperatives and purchases the excess kilowatts produced by a solar panel interconnection. Once a member decides to move forward with a solar energy system and has contacted the cooperative, the required paperwork and an inspection must be filed before a bi-directional meter is installed. A bi-directional meter measures the kilowatt-hours used by the member and the excess kilowatts generated by the solar system that can either be banked or sold back to Allegheny.

An interconnection with Somerset REC must:

1. Be owned, operated, leased or oth-

- erwise controlled by the member,
2. Be operated in parallel with the cooperative's distribution system,
 3. Have a nameplate capacity no greater than 110% of the member's peak demand or 25 kilowatts (kW) for residential service (whichever is less),
 4. Have a physical disconnect switch at or close to the transformer pole so the lineworkers can see the power is off,
 5. Have a \$1 million personal liability insurance coverage policy (the co-op does not accept self-insured members), and
 6. Have a copy of the inspection card on file at the co-op, along with a completed application and \$300 interconnection fee.

Many members are also taking advantage of the federal Solar Investment Tax Credit. This tax credit allows owners of new residential and commercial solar to deduct 26% of the cost of installing a solar energy system from their federal taxes in 2020, which can make solar energy more affordable. If you are thinking about solar panels but still not committed, the tax credit will also be available in 2021 for new residential solar connections, with 22% of the cost of the system eligible for a federal tax deduction.

Are solar panels right for your rural home? There can be many deciding factors that include cost and amount of sunlight exposure on your property. Some members look at installing solar panels as "the right thing to do" by creating a clean footprint for producing electricity.

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Co-op contractors help clear ROW

By Emily Baer

SOMERSET REC works in many ways to keep your power on. From repairing lines and poles after storms to clearing the way for electricity to flow to your home, our line crews strive to keep your lights on. How do we keep that electricity flowing? One way is through a vegetation management program that includes right-of-way (ROW) maintenance.

A key factor in any vegetation management program is landowner cooperation. You may be asking yourself why the cooperative needs to trim, cut or spray vegetation on your land. The bottom line is that a quality vegetation management program is essential in order to serve our membership with reliable electricity. Also, strict industry regulations mandate power lines, and the ROW surrounding them, must be clear of possible hazards caused by trees or vegetation.

Major problems can stem from vegetation overgrowth around power lines. Trees and branches touching



RIDGE TOP: Lee Brehm Jr., owner of Ridge Top Tree, uses a pole saw to trim tree limbs along primary electric lines on Stoy Road near Bar-D Lake.



TOP NOTCH: Contractor crews work to clear right of way in the Bakersville-Edie area. Pictured are, from left, Barry Blank Jr., Kyle Peifer, Luke Blank, Johnathan Harmon, Tom Lohr, owner of Top Notch Tree Care, Tom May, Cody Zimmerman and Dustin Howsare.

or falling on power lines is the most frequent reason for service interruptions. Other issues that arise from poor ROW maintenance include limited access to facilities where crews need to routinely perform inspections, maintenance, and/or repairs, and unsafe environments for children and animals, increasing the risk of electrocution.

Somerset REC serves over 2,200 miles of line and that can be a lot of overgrown vegetation! When developing an effective ROW program to service this amount of line, many factors are considered. These include line location (heavily wooded areas vs. along roadways), the type and density of vegetation, manpower, techniques, and finances. In addition to what we plan to service, we also do our best to work with individual members who take the time to call us with information about a dangerous tree or potential problems.

On all primary circuits, Somerset REC strives to maintain a minimum 40-foot ROW width or to the large tree line, whichever is greater. All debris resulting from tree work will be disposed

of daily in accordance with recognized safety rules and to the satisfaction of the property owner. The co-op also provides the contractor with member contact information and a set of maps highlighting the proposed project area. The contractor is required to, in good faith, attempt to contact property owners before performing work. The work performed by these contractors is bid work that is reviewed by a cooperative employee and must be approved before moving onto the next clearing section. Contractors also notify the operations department each morning of the exact pole location where they will be working that day.

Somerset REC is pleased to work with four local ROW contractors who perform vegetation trimming and tree removal in order to help prevent outages. These contractors include B & L Tree Service, Top Notch Tree Care, Laurel Mountain Tree Service and Ridge Top Tree. We also contract with Helicopter Minit-Men to do spraying each year. The co-op would like to familiarize our members with



LAUREL MOUNTAIN: Contractor crews work to clean up large pine trees after right-of-way clearing at a member's home near Central City. Pictured are, far left in bucket truck, Mark Lynch, and from left, Matt Yingling, Ben Savlan, and Jess Parks.

the contractors who will be performing work in your area.

B & L Tree Service has worked for Somerset REC since 2013 and has performed ROW maintenance work for other co-ops for more than 30 years. The Bisbing and Lafferty families, owners of B & L Tree Service, reside in the Buffalo Mills area and have 30 employees. There are currently five crews working for Somerset REC.

Owner Rodney Bisbing states, "I like working locally and being able to provide local work for my employees. Trees will always grow. I have good crews of guys who put in the hard work and make sure their jobs are done right. It's nice to meet the members and see the countryside of co-op lines."

B & L Tree Service is contracted to work in the Glencoe/Hays Mill area, along with work on the Seven Springs transmission line.

Tom Lohr, owner of Top Notch Tree Care, is very familiar with co-op lines. Lohr was a lineworker for Somerset REC for 12 years before starting his

own business. He currently has eight employees that make up three crews. Lohr enjoys working as a contractor for the co-op because it provides year-round work and a chance to still be part of the co-op.

"ROW clearing can be challenging," Lohr says. "Sometimes the weather cooperates and sometimes it doesn't. Safety is always a No. 1 concern of mine when working around high-voltage lines. It's nice to communicate with the members and help them understand the importance of ROW maintenance."

Top Notch Tree Care will be performing ROW work in the Bakersville/Edie/Shaffer Run area and Kuhntown over the next several months.

Laurel Mountain Tree Service located in Mineral Point, Pa., is owned and operated by Matt and Theresa Yingling. Matt has been a contractor for three years and has five full-time employees. Theresa states, "We are very fortunate to be contracted by SREC who has been

very helpful and wonderful to work for. Hopefully we can continue ROW clearing for many years to come."

Laurel Mountain Tree Service will be in the Central City area and near Ridge Road performing ROW maintenance through the summer.

Ridge Top Tree, hired to work in the Bando area, is the co-op's newest contractor. Owner Lee Brehm Jr., from Hooversville, Pa., worked for another contractor for two years prior to starting his own business. He is familiar with the co-op's specifications for line clearance and vegetation management and currently employs two crews.

"I enjoy seeing the progress made and the big picture once complete," Brehm says. "You look back and see miles of line cleared, knowing I'm making a difference helping to keep the lights on. It's an adrenaline-driven profession."

ROW maintenance is all about helping us help you. By allowing and supporting us in ROW maintenance, we can work to better keep your power on and keep the area around your lines safe. With proper maintenance, outages and operating costs can be kept to a minimum. Without ROW maintenance, one thing is for certain — there would be more outages. So, let us help you and help us to keep the right-of-way safe and clear! ☺



B&L TREE SERVICE: Crews from B&L Tree Service use bucket trucks and manpower to restore power to members after an ice storm near the Glencoe/Fairhope area in December.

SOMERSET RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC

GUEST COLUMN

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If you have any questions regarding a solar panel interconnection on cooperative lines, please contact me, General Manager Rus Ogburn or Manager of Metering Phil Stern to assist your AES needs.



LINWORKERS KNOW HOW TO GET THE JOB DONE.
LET'S THANK THEM FOR POWERING OUR LIVES.

Lineworker Appreciation Day
April 13, 2020