

# OCCUPATIONS IN RURAL ELECTRIFICATION

Work at a rural electric system is interesting and offers a lot of variety. Rural electric systems are dedicated to hiring the very finest employees. This overviews the kind of work there is to do – as well as how the utility fits into its community and how each system provides a link in a national network of consumer-controlled utilities.

While providing electricity is the focus of a rural electric system, its purpose goes beyond an exchange of money for a service rendered. To provide electricity is to provide an essential service that enhances the daily life of the consumer and, moreover, contributes to the entire community and the nation. Just as the appearance of rural electric systems revolutionized agriculture more than half a century ago, today the work of these systems continues to provide all Americans with a choice of where to live and work and raise their families.

Working for a cooperative or public district is different from working at a “traditional” business. The difference is that in a rural electric system the users of the utility are also the owners. Policies are set by a board of local people – consumers who are elected by their fellow consumers.

As the backbone of the local community, rural electric systems – at the direction of their consumers via the board of directors – may decide to take on a task in addition to providing electric service. Perhaps there's a need for sewer and water systems, or communication technology, cable TV service, a needed education health or social service to be provided, or a concentrated effort required to attract a new business to an area. The locally controlled member owned rural electric system is often the place to start.

Another important difference is that as the voice of rural Americans, rural electric systems join forces and actively lobby locally, at the state level and nationally, for an improved quality of life for their members. Rural electric systems have a real stake in helping their member consumers – their neighbors – in achieving all the benefits of our democratic society and a quality way of life. We believe all these differences have a positive influence on our work lives as well.

We hope you find this information helpful whether you are new to the job market and deciding for the first time what path to take or if you are reconsidering your career direction. Rural electric systems are looking for talented and resourceful people.

We offer competitive salaries and excellent benefits. We also offer you the opportunity and flexibility to make the most of your abilities in some of the most beautiful places to live in the world.

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# AN EFFECTIVE NETWORK

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The network of rural electrification includes several different organizations. There is the G&T, or generation and transmission cooperative, which produces high voltage electric power and transmits it to the substations of several distribution cooperatives. Here the power is stepped down to a lower voltage and the distribution cooperative, in turn, provides it to the end user. Distribution cooperatives are the members and owners of G&Ts and purchased power from them. Other members to the network that make up the rural electrification movement are statewide organizations and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA). A statewide is also a membership organization—an association of distribution cooperatives designed to provide services that the co-op could not easily or efficiently provide for themselves—such as representation to state legislators, or training and safety instruction. And NRECA is a membership cooperative of all the organizations—G&Ts, statewides and distribution cooperatives—which carries out tasks ranging from representation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., to providing insurance for co-ops and their families.

All of these organizations ultimately work to serve consumer members—the 25 million rural Americans nationwide. All are employers of talented and dedicated individuals who are a part of this network.

The majority, or about 900 rural electric utilities, is distribution systems, that is they concern themselves with getting power from a substation to the user—home, business, farm industry, school or church. The focus is on providing electric service. To do this, there are poles and lines and other equipment known as the “plant” that are used to carry electricity. The system’s plant must be planned, designed, constructed and maintained. There are tasks that involve measuring and recording the amount of electricity used and billing for it, paying the costs associated with providing electricity, accounting for the inventory of equipment, keeping track of money received and spent, and financing new construction. And, there are jobs that deal with the relationships the cooperative has with its consumers and its community.

## GENERAL MANAGER

At the top of every organization is a **general manager** whose job it is to oversee all of the tasks. In all, there more than 100 different job descriptions associated with electric distribution systems—technical jobs, jobs involving trades, professional jobs and management. To give you an idea of the work at a rural electric system, this booklet describes some of the core responsibilities by job title.

## COMPUTER TECHNICIAN

Before we explore these jobs, it’s important to note that the common tool for all of the job categories is the computer. Increasingly, the planning and design, construction and maintenance tasks are simplified by using the computer. At the same time, the computer enables the co-op worker to do more complex tasks in far less time. This is equally true of work that requires accounting for inventory or sending out bills, as it is for conducting an energy audit and giving consumers sound advice about how to best use electricity. The job of the computer technician, who maintains the computer system and programs it to meet the co-op’s needs and keeps it updated, is as necessary as the lineman who strives to keep your lights on.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Another important category of work that gets done at a cooperative is the work of the **board of directors**. Board members set the policy of the organization and hire the general manager who oversees the day-to-day operations, and who hires a staff to carry out those operations. Being a director is not a salaried job, though the co-op generally compensates the director for the time and expenses associated with various meetings. It is an essential job; one that helps shape the cooperatives. It is the board of directors that is elected by other members of the cooperatives, and represents their needs, and it is the consumer member who is the owner of a rural electric system. This relationship is important to understand, since all employees ultimately work for the consumer member.

# THE DISTRIBUTION CO-OP

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Whether your career choice finds you working in the co-op office, outdoors with a crew, or a combination of both, you’ll find the work fulfilling and purposeful, and the cooperative spirit contagious.

## CASHIER/RECEPTIONIST

Perhaps the first contact a consumer has with the co-op is with the **cashier/receptionist**. This job involves greeting consumers and other visitors and assisting them or directing them to the appropriate person. The cashier may receive payments over the counter and answer questions or address complaints. The cashier may also receive mail payments. Like all positions, the cashier represents the co-op and is an extension of the commitment to personal service. A candidate for this position should like dealing with the public. Computer skills are a definite plus.

## ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

An **administrative assistant** works directly with the general manager and the board of directors providing efficient, accurate and confidential secretarial services. He or she serves as the liaison between board manager, department heads, employees, members and business contacts. He or she is responsible for maintaining legal documents of the cooperative. His or her duties can vary widely, but all is done with confidentiality.

## ACCOUNT/BOOKKEEPER

The **account/bookkeeper** is responsible for keeping a complete and systematic set of subsidiary records and ledger accounts to record financial transactions and show the financial state of the system. This individual, who probably has a college degree in business or accounting and is computer literate, also prepares reports and financial statements. They also are responsible for taking care of the records and necessary data for computing employee wages and doing payroll.

## BILLING INFORMATION CLERK

A **billing information clerk** assists new members in completing applications for service. This responsibility can include responding to questions regarding consumer accounts and processing the work order that initiates the repairs or changes of service.

## MARKETING AND MEMBER SERVICES REP.

A **marketing and member services representative** advises members about the efficient use of electricity. Since there are many different needs for electricity, from heating a home to powering motors in a commercial facility to powering computers in an office or powering equipment at a dairy farm, this is a varied and interesting job. Often, this individual promotes load management, programs designed to use energy more efficiently from the perspective of the co-op. This job may entail working with the community making presentations on energy and safety to groups or schools, or it may entail encouraging rural development – helping to bring new business to the area.

At some co-ops the job of a communication/public information specialist may be a separate position or is included as the member services representative's responsibility. The communication/public information specialist develops written member communication including newsletters, brochures and pamphlets, and prepares material for publication. This individual may conduct member education programs and write press releases and articles. He or she may publish a regular newsletter for the membership, or contribute to the statewide publication. This person works with the statewide office on grassroots efforts – that is informing the membership on legislative issues that affect the cooperative.

## MANAGERS OF OFFICE OR MEMBER SERVICES

**Managers of office services or member services** may assume the responsibilities and execute tasks of the before-mentioned positions. In larger systems the work can be more specialized with tasks divided among several employees. The manager coordinates activities, analyzes and organizes operations and procedures for their departments and assumes the responsibility for consumer, general and plant accounting. In many ways working for a smaller cooperative is a bigger challenge. Jobs throughout a smaller co-op may result in multi tasking, offering employees both more variety and more responsibility.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR

**Economic Development Coordinator** works with and assists the local communities in promoting job growth and acquiring potential commercial enterprise to locate in the area. They can assist local and already established businesses in locating funds to enhance their existing facilities to provide job growth or business stability.

## MANAGER OF ENGINEERING & OPERATIONS

**Manager of engineering & operations.** These individuals are responsible for the long-and-short range system planning, design, inspection of distribution, substation and other facilities. He or she may direct acquisition of right-of-way and construction sites, and has authority over the design, construction, maintenance and service activities of the cooperative.

## LINE CREW

The jobs of a **line crew** are very important and because of the dangers of the work, great concentration and strict adherence to procedure are extremely important – ongoing safety and training are heavily emphasized.

## JOURNEYMAN LINEMAN

**Journeyman lineman** is responsible for performing a variety of tasks around construction and repair of distribution lines and on structures and other equipment involved in the distribution of electricity. He or she has completed a period of time (usually 4 years) as an apprentice lineman.

## GROUNDMAN / EQUIPMENT OPERATORS

A **groundman** assists the linemen in construction, replacement and maintenance of electrical equipment. The crew is often aided further by an equipment operator/truck driver who operates specialized equipment including digger derricks, bucket trucks and other equipment mounted on trucks. The crew is supervised by a line foreman who usually is, by trade and training, a journeyman lineman.

## SERVICEMAN

A **serviceman** (a journeyman lineman) usually works alone. They are among the most visible of electric cooperative employees. He or she is the one that meets the members face-to-face in the field. It may be to hook up a service, installing their meter, fixing a power quality issue or collecting unpaid accounts and removing meters for nonpayment. He is confronted with many questions regarding the cooperative's programs, procedures or account information. The serviceman develops a more personal relationship with the consumer/members of his area.

## METER READER

A **meter reader** is responsible for reading and checking meters. They may have a scheduled route they read or may read them randomly to check for and report needed repairs or meter tampering.

## DISPATCHER

A **dispatcher** handles radio communications with line crews, to keep track of routine assignments during regular hours and to assign crews in the event of an emergency day or night. The person is also responsible for remote control switches to manage system load.

## MAPPING TECHNICIAN

A **mapping technician** maintains current and accurate system maps using a computer assisted mapping system. The location of every utility pole, transformer, meter and all the other equipment it takes to distribute electricity is recorded.

## STAKING ENGINEER

A **staking engineer** investigates surveys and stakes electric distribution lines in accordance with construction specification. The emphasis of field engineer's work is getting power to new consumers. The person in this job also writes the work orders to initiate the process of getting new service and may assist the members in acquiring right-of-way easements.

## PURCHASING AGENT

A **purchasing agent** is responsible for ordering and maintaining a sufficient inventory of material and tools to keep the co-op supplied and ready for most emergencies.

## MATERIAL AND WORK ORDER CLERK

A **material and work order clerk** receives, stores and issues line equipment and materials and tools and safety equipment. They are responsible for the record keeping and inventory of the items and keeping a clean and safe warehouse.

## MECHANIC

A **mechanic** is needed to maintain and keep in good working order all of the many vehicles and trucks that the co-op uses. The tasks may be as basic as changing windshield wipers to motor repair or fixing and welding broken equipment. At time the mechanic may be called to do repairs in the field.

## CUSTODIANS

**Custodians** are responsible for maintaining a working facility. Daily cleaning is required. Their job consists of regular maintenance and as needed the more advanced construction or remodeling of the cooperative's facilities and grounds.

# WORK AT THE G&T

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A generation and transmission cooperative (G&T) is essentially interested in getting the power to its members. A G&T serves the distribution cooperative bringing power to its doorsteps (the substation), ready to be distributed to homes, businesses and farms. A G&T may play the role of a broker, that is the G&T may arrange for power for its members by buying it from other organizations which generate electricity. Or, the G&T may generate the power and transmit it over high voltage lines. Usually, a G&T does both.

Work at a G&T entails some of the same jobs as there are at the distribution co-op in that there is billing and other administrative work to do. The essential difference in these jobs is that the member is the distribution co-op and not the individual consumer. Some of the jobs at a G&T aren't found at the distribution cooperative at all. They are responsibilities specifically related to generating power or to securing wholesale electricity. These jobs may use the same skills or require the same education or – even carry a similar title, but be very different in reality – all because the G&T is not distributing electricity to consumers, but is involved in its generation and transmission to co-ops. Here are some jobs found at a G&T.

## DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

The **director of environmental affairs**, often a registered professional engineer (PE), is concerned that the co-op achieve and maintain compliance with environmental requirements – at the federal, state and local level. This responsibility includes air quality, water and waste management and hazardous materials compliance. There are many potential pollutants at an electric generating facility, and many pollution control devices and procedures which this individual may oversee. In addition, laws and regulations change permits are required, policies and procedures may be affected, and coordination with other plant operations and personnel is essential. It's a big job.

## SYSTEM DISPATCHER/POWER SYSTEM COORDINATOR

**System dispatcher/power system coordinator** - The system dispatcher determines the need for and the availability of electric power. He or she directs the generating station to add or reduce operating generating units to produce more or less power, arranges for wholesale electric energy from other utilities which are interconnected across the nation, and monitors and regulates energy flow within the system and with interconnected utilities.

## MANAGER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Manager of economic development** - Attracting industry and promoting job growth is a natural responsibility of a G&T. The co-op can assure a potential commercial enterprise that there will be abundant power available. And, the G&T itself has had essential experience with the area's infrastructure – transportation, roads bridges, water supply and other needs a business may consider when locating a facility. Likewise, the G&T knows about the political environment, the cultural and tourist attractions, the school system, the economy of the area and the attitude of the community. Economic development covers a lot of territory including small businesses, home businesses, tourism and community services. Moreover, as a part of the larger community, the G&T can help communities assess their needs and evaluate what types of businesses, enterprises or efforts are likely to succeed there. The G&T and member co-ops may be able to assist in securing financing for a new or relocating enterprise. Each of the G&T's member co-ops can benefit from this effort to "build electric load" and provide additional consumers – new neighbors which in turn, can help provide jobs.

# THE STATEWIDE ORGANIZATION

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The statewide organization is an association of co-ops formed to represent those co-ops to legislators and the governor's office. The statewide also can provide other services such as communication and training, with more efficiency than if each co-op member took on the job by themselves. An example of such a service is found at the statewide editor's office.

## STATEWIDE EDITOR

The **statewide editor** oversees the production of a publication written for the rural electric consumer. Throughout the United States, there are 32 statewide magazines reaching more than six million consumer members. Often, the communications/public information specialist of the member distribution cooperatives, contributes news and information about his or her co-op which is incorporated into the magazine and distributed to the co-op's members. Within the statewide system there are usually photographers, publishers, and printing facilities.

## LOBBYIST/SENIOR LEGISLATIVE REP.

**Lobbyist/Senior Legislative Representative** – This position may be found at the statewide organization or at the G&T. In general, the job consists of monitoring and analyzing state and federal legislation and regulations; communicating the position of the organization to members; lobbying for passage or defeat of legislation or regulation on behalf of rural electrification and maintaining positive relationships with and educating elected officials and their staffs about rural electrification. Additionally, the legislative representative may help coordinate political action committees, host or coordinate legislative meetings, maintain a grassroots lobbying program, and provide assistance to members with reporting requirements under the law.

## SAFETY AND LOSS CONTROL COORDINATOR

**Safety and Loss Control Coordinator** - Safety is of the utmost importance to everyone who works with constructions, repair and maintenance of electric lines and equipment, and to office personnel as well. The person in this job plans, coordinates and presents safety programs to line crews and other co-op personnel throughout the state. Very often, the person in this job has worked as a journeyman line worker or crew foreman with a distribution system. Increasingly this job deals with the entire safety and health picture — from proper record keeping to ergonomics.

## CORPORATE COUNSEL

**Corporate Counsel.** Law school and admittance to the bar are the tickets to success as corporate counsel for a cooperative or statewide organization. Many statewides employ an attorney on staff, while distribution cooperatives usually retain a firm and use the services of their counsel on an as-needed basis. An attorney helps the co-op by performing legal tasks, including reviewing contracts or by-laws amendments, helping secure financing and making sure the co-op is in compliance with the multitude of laws associated with running a business, especially a utility.

# AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

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The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) is the membership organization for distribution cooperatives, G&Ts and statewide organizations — a total of 1,000 members in all. NRECA was founded in 1942 specifically to overcome World War II shortages of electric construction materials and to obtain insurance coverage for newly constructed rural electric systems. Since those early days, NRECA has been an advocate of a strong rural electrification program as well as a supporter of effective rural development.

NRECA is a co-op, and like its member organizations, its policy development begins with its members. Every one of the 1,000 member systems has a vote, making NRECA a true grassroots organization. It is located in Washington D.C.

The primary goal and cooperative tradition of the rural electrification program are to help people accomplish together what they might not be able to do alone.

Inside NRECA more than 500 employees work to provide services such as legislative representation before Congress and the Executive Branch; monitoring regulatory activities affecting electric service and the environment; management and skills training, and consulting assistance for cooperative directors and employees; publications, public relations, advertising, and other communications services and a wide range of insurance and employee benefit packages.

NRECA also has an International Programs Division, assisting in the development of rural electrification overseas.

Additionally, subsidiary groups provide insurance programs for members of electric co-ops, handle insurance claims, audit and inspect pole production companies for quality control, manage overseas development contracts and provide marketing services for NRECA members. NRECA also supports a research program to develop new techniques to solve problems unique to rural electric systems and improve production and delivery of electricity in a cost-effective, safe and environmentally acceptable manner.

# WHAT MAKES A GOOD DIRECTOR

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If you live in the service area of the electric cooperative, you are a member owner of the cooperative. And as a member-owner of the cooperative, you will be asked to vote for a representative of your community to serve on the board of directors of the co-op. If you are eligible, you may even be asked to serve on a board of directors yourself someday. What does a director do? What makes a good director of a cooperative? Here are some guidelines, many of which are suggestions of the Agricultural Cooperative Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture:

- A good director is a member willing to take the time to be on the board.
- A good director listens to members...and keeps an open mind to another's point of view.
- A good director must watch co-op, but not interfere with the daily operations.
- A good director needs to practice sound business principles in his or her own affairs.
- A good director can be trusted.
- A good director voices opinions honestly and has good judgement.
- A good director takes part in the community.
- A good director recognizes and assumes legal responsibility for his or her actions as a board member.
- A good director knows that cooperatives are like other business firms except for the fact that members own the cooperative, they control the cooperative with their votes and the cooperative does not keep a profit, but gives margins back to the member as patronage refunds or capital credits. A good director can explain these differences called "the cooperative way."
- And finally, to really measure up, a good director is willing to study ways to be a better director and is ready to be educated and attend schooling and meetings across the U.S. to learn the cooperative business and stay abreast of the changes facing the cooperative.