



April 28, 2010

## Blue Ridge Electric Co-op to add to its infrastructure

By Jason Evans

PICKENS — As the recession has affected home construction and sales, so too has it affected providing power to new homes and businesses.

Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative President and CEO Charles Dalton said last year saw the slowest growth for the cooperative since the days of World War II — with only 81 new members joining the cooperative.

600 net new members joined in 2008, Dalton said.

“Things have been flat for us for awhile, in terms of new developments, new subdivisions, new apartments, new growth,” he said.



**CHARLES DALTON**

But Dalton said officials know that growth will return to the area, and they’re preparing for that growth by embarking on an infrastructure improvement program that will represent a more than \$60 million investment into the counties the cooperative serves.

“We’re looking to the future with a little bit more hope and excitement,” Dalton said.

“We’ve taken this opportunity to do some long-term planning and long-term investments while everything else was kind of quiet,” he said. “We do know that growth will come back ...and when it comes back, it’ll be strong.”

The engineering work plan is scheduled to take 4-years to complete and will be “a sizable investment” in Blue Ridge’s service areas.

“Improving our quality of service and getting ready for growth,” Dalton said.

Under the plan, new power lines will be placed, and existing lines will be upgraded, Dalton said.

The plan will also continue to address relocating power lines that are now located in overgrown areas like pine thickets.

In the cooperative’s early days, due to the scarcity of building materials for power lines and poles, the lines were placed in pastures and other clearings, but as farms petered out, the clearings grew over, making those lines difficult to access and service, Dalton said.

“Back then we didn’t engineer the best routes, as they do today,” he said. “They didn’t go around roadways, they didn’t go around main highways, they just went the most limited direction.”

“That was the right thing to do at the time,” he said. “But as the years rolled by, it became clear that those were not the best practices and it created some problems for us.”

Hard-to-reach lines are often the sources of outages after major storms, he said.

“Every year we’re seeing more of these lines moved out of the woods, moved out of remote areas, and onto more established roadways,” Dalton said.

Relocating the lines brings down their maintenance costs and improves reliability, he said.

Well maintained right of ways can be crucial as crews work to restore power after storms, Dalton said.

“We have quite a bit of right of ways to maintain, and it’s in the best shape that it’s ever been in,” he said, adding that Blue Ridge has 7,000 miles of lines covering four counties.

In fact, vegetation maintenance programs operated by Blue Ridge were instrumental in the short amount of time it took crews to restore power after two storms in January and March of this year.

Those storms hit mountainous areas of Oconee County hardest, but power was restored between 12 hours and two days after the storms, Dalton said.

This year marks Blue Ridge Electric’s 70th anniversary.