

Mission Tallahassee:

MPUA Mutual Aid Line Crews Observe Public Power Week By Rebuilding Tallahassee Electric System After Hurricane's Fury

In the last three years running, a powerhouse trio of hurricanes, each spaced about a year apart, battered the electric systems of mainland Florida. And in each case, Missouri and Arkansas lineworkers organized by MPUA have been on hand to help life get back to normal.

As Hurricane Michael bore down on the Florida Panhandle, an early morning email to MPUA on Oct. 8, 2018, from the American Public Power Association activated MPUA's mutual aid network. Recruiting calls went out to member cities. Within 24 hours, line crews from 10 MPUA-member utilities were ready to hit the road. The crews hailed from the Missouri cities of Carthage, Columbia, Hannibal, Higginsville, Independence, Macon, Nixa, Poplar Bluff and Waynesville, plus a crew from Conway, Arkansas. The combined force of 47 MPUA-organized lineworkers equipped with eight bucket trucks, seven digger trucks, and 11 other linework vehicles rolled south toward the Gulf coast from their respective towns. They would arrive in Florida two days later to join hundreds of other workers from across the nation.



“After 2016’s hurricanes (Hermine and Matthew), and then Hurricane Irma in 2017, we thought we had seen and experienced the worst,” said Amy Zubaly, executive director of the Florida Municipal Electric Association. “We thought we’d be spared from another storm of that magnitude at least for a few years. And then

exactly 13 months later after Irma, while public power communities nationwide were in the middle of celebrating Public Power Week, the panhandle of Florida was devastated by Hurricane Michael.”

Michael made its violent Oct. 10 landfall as a Category 4 storm and remained a Category 4 as it tore through the Panhandle. It was the strongest hurricane on record to ever strike the region, and the fourth strongest, by wind speed, ever to make landfall in the contiguous U.S. With 155 mph winds, just 2 mph shy of a Category 5 storm, the full path of the storm was immense, and the destruction was widespread, laying waste to thousands of homes and buildings, splintering trees, and crumbling roads and utility infrastructure.

The Missouri and Arkansas mutual aid crews became a strong part of a powerful relief force, ready to begin a huge task. “More than 600 personnel

Helping Those In Need

The mutual aid response from the Missouri and Arkansas public power utilities was coordinated through MPUA’s mutual aid network. Assisting cities are reimbursed by the municipal utilities receiving assistance. Nationally, mutual aid agreements organized through the American Public Power Association link more than 2,000 public power and rural electric cooperatives, so they can help each other in times of need.

from 16 States and more than 80 public power utilities came to help us restore power, and in some cases completely rebuild the electric grid in those communities,” said FMEA’s Zubaly. “At peak, more than 400,000 customers in the region were without power, with nearly 122,000 of them from five Florida public power communities - Tallahassee, Havana, Quincy, Chattahoochee and Blountstown.”

For James Pittman, a journeyman lineman from Carthage Water & Electric Plant (CW&EP), the mission was his first experience of such widespread damage. “We got to Tallahassee just as the hurricane was beginning to roll through,” said Pittman. “We weren’t very close to where the damage was worst, but going out the first day, my impression was similar to what we see here after a tornado, except on a massive scale. You’ve got trees down, lines and poles broken, trees through houses. Where we worked in Tallahassee, it was that kind of destruction but on a far bigger scale – an entire town, not just a piece of town.”

The MPUA-organized teams worked for seven days in the capital city of Tallahassee, where 96% of the city’s electric distribution system and 60% of the transmission system was down. Crews labored long hours under grueling physical conditions, made more bearable by the appreciation of those whose power was being restored. “You might get a few negative words, from some frustrated people who are the last to be restored,” said CW&EP’s Pittman. “But most people are very friendly, and really thankful. Hotel workers – we weren’t even working in their area – would come out and thank us. Just an overwhelming appreciation.” Pittman went on to recall several special moments with residents. “One family stopped by just to give us some Krispy Kreme donuts. One local lineman that



Photo Credit: City of Tallahassee

we worked with, his family made us chicken and rice one day for lunch and brought it out to the work site. And one special-needs gentleman, just the look on his face when we got him hooked up, it brought tears to your eyes.”

The lineworkers work days were long, hot and tiring. But the work itself was mostly familiar. “There were some new things we’d never used before –

Solar
Construction
Electrical



BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

844-821-4700

mcpower.com



Pittman said that power restoration work is much the same everywhere, regardless of location and scale. “It’s just like for storms around Missouri. You start out, kill a feeder line so you could get a main line back up. But working restoration on that scale, communication and coordination become a bigger part of the job,” Pittman explained further. “On one line we probably had five different utilities, some from Missouri, some from Florida, working down the line. They’d give us a section, and you’ve got to coordinate with the rest of them. There’s a lot of running back and forth, because all your radio systems don’t necessarily coincide with each other.

different insulators, different sized wires we don’t use around here – a little bit of a challenge at first,” said Pittman. “But you learn your little tricks on it, and soon it all works out really well.”

So, you’d have to run down the road, talk with the other crew, they’ve got to run back and talk to you, you kind of get a coordination plan worked out as you go along, with how to respond if something would go wrong

or you’d have to stop your work. You’re mostly working with the same bunch of guys, so after a while it goes better and better. But I guess I wouldn’t say it ever turned routine. It’s challenging, and you’re not working with materials you’ve always worked with.”

Seven days and thousands of workers-hours later, power had been restored to 95% of Tallahassee electric customers, and the Missouri and Arkansas crews were released with the thanks of the city of Tallahassee. “Thousands of people’s lives were forever changed on October 10 and it will take some time to fully rebuild the communities that were so severely devastated,” said Zubaly. “But just 12 days after Michael unleashed its wrath, with the help of hundreds of public power personnel from around the country, our five public power communities there had restored power to all their customers who could take power.”

Kerry Cordray is a public information officer for the Missouri Public Utility Alliance (MPUA), where he has worked since 2012. He previously served as a public radio reporter and as a communicator for the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

This article reprinted with permission from the Missouri Public Utility Alliance Advantage Magazine, Winter 2018. Find the magazine online at <https://mpua.org/page/magazine>.

GENERAL CODE
A Member of the ICC Family of Companies

Expert Codification Services

New & Revitalized Codes

Code Analysis, Consultation & Updates

Visual Zoning™

Experience the higher standard. Explore the possibilities.

GeneralCode.com | 800.836.8834