

WEST VIRGINIANS FOR RELIABLE POWER



State Journal
January 8, 2010
Commentary
By: Charles Bayless

Quality of Life Depends on Reliable Power

To help us work our way through the current tough economic situation, it is important to look back into our history. During the 1930s, the landmark **Rural Electrification Administration** (REA) projects helped break the back of the Great Depression and became the catalyst that eventually would transform the economies of the Appalachians and the American South.

REA projects literally “turned the lights on” throughout much of West Virginia. Now it is more important than ever that we work together to keep them on by ensuring a reliable and affordable flow of electricity that can meet the growing power demands of our region.

While public concern for large-scale infrastructure projects is inevitable, we must understand the greater need to protect our way of life. Experts believe we’re facing a dangerous deterioration of our national and regional infrastructure, including the system that moves electricity from where it is produced to where it is needed – our electric power grid.

To understand why those who bravely faced down the Great Depression and embraced the REA project believed the growth in our economy is closely tied to the strength of our electric grid requires a brief history lesson.

Rural electrification was rooted in a belief that affordable power would increase the economic competitiveness of the American family farm and boost the standard of living and quality of life of farmers. While nearly 90 percent of urban dwellers had electricity by the 1930’s, only 10 percent of rural America did. Unregulated utility companies insisted that it was too expensive to string electric lines to farmsteads out in the country.

But by the end of the decade, the number of rural electric customers had risen to 25 percent.

Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the REA established 417 rural electric cooperatives, and new household conveniences were changing lifestyles in rural America, particularly throughout the south. Local businesses sprang up to sell new electric appliances. Consumer goods, such as radios, were becoming fixtures in the home.

WEST VIRGINIANS FOR RELIABLE POWER



Fast forward more than 75 years. Many of these “creature comforts” we have come to rely on have resulted in a huge increase in electric demand by individual consumers. Despite new energy-efficiency technologies, new homes are larger, contain two or more televisions, one or more computers and a myriad of electronic devices that require electricity. More than 90 percent of new technologies used by consumers run up electric power. Central air-conditioning is the norm, not the exception.

Furthermore, urban centers today now spread far beyond traditional city limits, with suburban and now “exurban” sprawl invading what were until recently rural landscapes.

We’re now seeing this in eastern parts of West Virginia as Washington, D.C.’s suburban explosion continues unabated.

All of this demand is putting a lot of stress on our region’s power grid and our economy. Back in the 1930s, private power companies only had to string lines and dispatch power to their local customer base. Today, the grid is interconnected – utilities in northern West Virginia purchase bulk power via the largest interconnected, managed grid in the world, the PJM Interconnection.

Through PJM, businesses and consumers throughout our region now are guaranteed fair access to the grid. But, in return, customers also must be willing to accept improvements to the system if we expect our reliability grid to hold up. America’s transmission system is now woefully outdated. Reliability “gaps” are now becoming chronic, and the 2003 blackouts should remind everyone that an outage in rural Ohio cascaded hundreds of miles and crippled major metropolitan areas, including New York City and Detroit.

Today, it is our duty to support economic progress in the state. West Virginia cannot fail to attract employers because it lacks a state-of-the-art, 21st century power infrastructure. As a proponent of reliable electric power across the state and region, I implore West Virginians to consider how far we’ve come since the lights came on and how much we’ve changed after all these years.

Charles Bayless is an electric utility industry expert. He served as CEO of two electric utility companies during a career of more than 25 years. A native of Dunbar, he also is the former president and provost of West Virginia University Institute of Technology in Montgomery.