

Every May, electric cooperatives across the nation celebrate Electrical Safety Month. It's a time when we place a spotlight on ways to be safe when around electricity. In lieu of the Leap Day storm that tore through the Ozarks in February, May is also a great time to learn about being safe around electricity before, during and after storms.

No matter what type of weather or damage to electrical equipment or infrastructure, resulting safety hazards are typically the same.

“When you're dealing with storm cleanup or flood-damaged property, the prospect of an electrical accident is probably not top of mind,” Safe Electricity's Molly Hall said. “But, it's the first thing you should think of before you go outside, step foot into a flooded area or enter a storm-damaged building.”

To stay safe after a disaster strikes, stay away from downed power lines and be alert to the possibility that tree limbs or debris may hide an electrical hazard. Treat all downed or hanging power lines as if they are energized. Lines do not have to be arcing or sparking to be live. Warn others to stay away and contact White River Valley Electric Cooperative.

It's not hard to see why safety is a top priority for WRVEC. Line crews working around electricity is a life-or-death situation every day for many of our employees. Safety is especially crucial for line crews to get members' power restored in the event of an outage, especially when a storm has caused the outage. How do crews stay safe and how do they get member power back on?

First, in the event of an outage, supervisors determine what the magnitude of the outage is and begin with the best way to restore power to the most people – usually beginning with substations and main lines. Then, dispatch will call crews in and get the correct resources to the site of the outage.

“Before anyone leaves to go out on a job, we have a job briefing so that everyone is on the same page,” Operations Manager Kenny Bilyeu said. “When everyone is on the same page, we can help prevent injuries due to miscommunication.”

When the substations and main lines have been fixed, then crews begin fixing smaller and individual outages.

“It's like water in a pipe. To be able to get water (or electricity) to the smaller pipes (or smaller outages), there has to be water in the main pipe that gives water to the smaller pipes (like substations and main power lines),” WRVEC Assistant Technician Rick Burkhart said.

Precautions to keep line crews and members safe are always taken. Electric cooperatives and their line workers have multiple codes of safety that they follow to stay safe on the job. Line crews wear hard hats, safety glasses, fire resistant clothing and have harnesses when they are up on top of a pole. When working around lines that are hot, crews also wear rubber gloves and sleeves to prevent electrocution.

Whether it's a tornado, ice storm, flood or other natural disaster, storm season can be dangerous for members and for crews. Use the following tips to stay safe this storm season.

- Be aware during outages that traffic lights may be out. Treat all road intersections as four-way stops and proceed with caution.
- Move at least 10 feet from a downed power line or anything touching it. The human body is a ready conductor of electricity. If someone has come in contact with a downed line, call 911 and do not touch them.
- Never try to move a power line or anything in contact one, even with a non-conductive material. If slightly wet, these materials can still conduct electricity.
- Whether it is a flood or a puddle, be wary of downed lines, electrical cords and submerged outlets. All can energize the water to a lethal level.
- Do not use an electrical appliance after it has been wet until it has been examined by a qualified service repair dealer.
- Before re-entering storm-damaged property, be sure all electric and gas services are turned off. If you cannot reach your breaker box safely, call White River for assistance.