



# The Spring Fire

## Through a Lineworker's Eyes

BY EDDIE SMITH || ASSISTANT LINE SUPERINTENDENT I

Wednesday, July 27, 2018, is a day I will never forget.

I was at work when a coworker walked up to a group of us and said there was a fire on the Forbes Park-Trinchera border. As I drove home I could see the plume of smoke on La Veta Pass and my heart sank.

I was hopeful firefighters could put out the fire before it spread into San Isabel Electric Association's territory (Forbes Park). That night, I received word the Forbes Park and Wagon Creek subdivisions had been evacuated. Firefighters needed our help shutting off power to those communities to keep the firefighters safe. The linemen were immediately dispatched to shut down the power.

The next day was filled with heavy smoke and dark skies. I could only wait and wonder how much damage the Spring Fire had caused. How many Members' lives was this huge fire affecting? Several times throughout the day I went to a vantage point west of La Veta. I sat and stared at the huge smoke cloud with its red tint, hoping the smoke would clear and my prayers would be answered. As Middle Creek and Tres Valles Members were told to prepare to evacuate, airplanes and helicopters showed up. The fight was on.

Thursday night, I sat on the hill again. I watched as the fire topped the mountain and headed to the east. As an army of firefighters drove by, one stopped and told me Middle Creek and Tres Valles Members were being evacuated and our Members in La Veta were now being told to get ready to evacuate. The fire was spreading rapidly with no sign of slowing down. As the fire progressed, linemen killed the power ahead of its path. Eventually everyone west and south of La Veta had been told to leave. The town shut down. Families were displaced. Homes were empty.

By Friday, fire managers had set up in Blanca and I had started traveling Highway 160 over La Veta Pass daily for a fire briefing and a co-op meeting. As I made the trip, I was able to see all of the destruction. On one of my trips over the pass I looked down on the home of one of my good friends, whom I have known all

my life. I saw his house. It had been destroyed the night before by the fire. The fire just kept going, burning through San Isabel territory, affecting our power grid. But worse than that, Members' homes and personal belongings were being destroyed.

On Wednesday, July 4, after receiving permission from fire managers, San Isabel crews were able to go in to start making damage assessments of our power system in the Forbes Park and Wagon Creek areas. We already had materials on hand to start making repairs.

By Friday, contractors and San Isabel crews were repairing the system as quickly as possible to make the area safe for neighbors again. During this time, the Spring Fire jumped across Highway 160 to the north and quickly moved through Paradise Acres, Chama and Redwing.

The fire in the areas where we were working to restore power was still calm, but in the backs of our minds we all knew the fire was still active in other areas.

The fire finally stopped tearing up our system and destroying our Members' lives July 12, 15 days after it started.

Throughout my 22 years of working as a lineman, and most recent as assistant line superintendent, I have never experienced a storm of this magnitude. With most storms, the damage is done within a 24-hour period. The crews go to work to repair and restore the power. The Spring Fire consumed 109,000 acres with almost all of its destruction being in San Isabel territory. The fire lasted 15 long days, but hundreds of our Members' lives were changed forever.



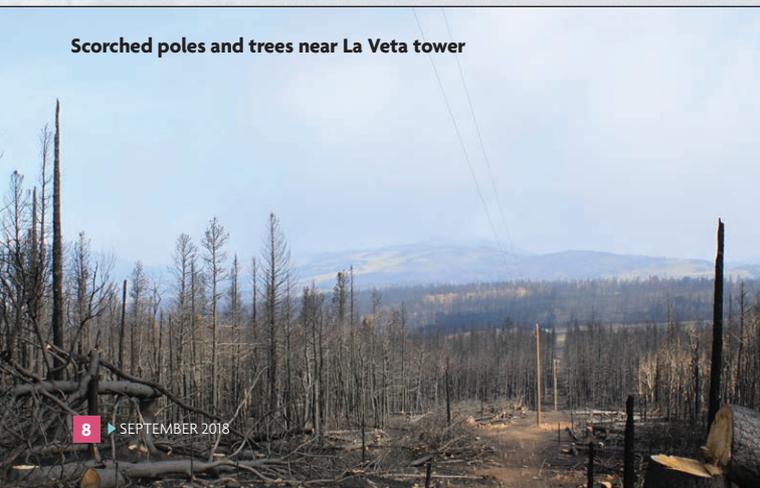
**Eddie Smith**  
Assistant Line Superintendent I



Spring Fire damage



Burned trees near La Veta tower



Scorched poles and trees near La Veta tower

I attended several public meetings during the Spring Fire. I would look around the room to see people whom we serve coming together as a community to support one another in a time of need. It breaks my heart to hear, "I lost my house; all my kids' pictures and family heirlooms are gone."

San Isabel Electric is committed to our Members. During the Spring Fire, men and women from La Veta, Walsenburg, Pueblo West, Trinidad and five contracting crews were called in, more than 75 personnel in all. The objective was to restore power to our Members in a timely manner and do so safely. San Isabel hopes that knowing that we are committed to serve you eases the stress a little.

My heart still breaks for you who have lost so much, and San Isabel is committed to help you through this difficult time in your life. San Isabel has a slogan that simply states we want to be your "trusted energy resource." I would like to add that we also care about our Members and will be here to help you through these hard times. Thank you for letting us serve you.

Our job is not done. We will rebuild together.

*Eddie Smith*



Remains of the La Veta tower



The mobile communications tower begins to take shape.



Emergency mobile communications tower

# EMERGENCY MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS TOWER

The Spring Fire devoured nearly 109,000 acres and more than 130 homes. While destructive, the fire also fostered a sense of community and family in the small towns of southern Colorado. Smoke filled the skies of southern Colorado, it was visible everywhere. But there was something more powerful than the fire that could be seen and felt from Trinidad all the way up the Front Range. It was the desire and willingness of people wanting to cooperatively help.

San Isabel Electric is built on a cooperative model. The strength of the co-op model comes from the meaning of the word “cooperative”. The fire was exemplifying the same cooperative community values of San Isabel Electric Members and staff. Our strength comes from the relationships we build and maintain together with you and our communities.

The Spring Fire began on Wednesday, June 27. Our communications tower was destroyed the next day. The automated meters use the tower to communicate information back to headquarters. The tower also provides the main radio communications path for lineworkers’ trucks and handheld radios when they’re in the field. Our crews working in the burn zones had two goals: to get the lights back on and help Members recover as quickly as possible.

When the tower was destroyed, lineworkers had no way to communicate with each other or back to headquarters, and we had no way of knowing which meters were destroyed or damaged by the fire. The loss of the tower made the dangerous working conditions of the fire even more treacherous.

An emergency mobile communications tower had been a recurring dream of one of our tech services engineers. The disastrous circumstances that would create the need for his wondrous idea to ignite arose during the Spring Fire.

Our tech services engineer hit the ground running and had supplies for the emergency mobile communications tower purchased by the third day of the fire. The electricians put in hours of hard work and by July 3 the structural integrity and mounting work began. The team finished the trailer on July 9 and it was deployed on La Veta Pass the next day.

The new mobile tower, enclosed in a 8-foot by 12-foot trailer, includes an automated meter, radio and networking infrastructure, even air conditioning to keep the stacks of equipment cool. It is powered by existing power lines or the generator that is also part of the mobile tower.

The emergency mobile communications tower is being used until we are finished rebuilding the tower and building on the new permanent site.

The disaster that created the need for a mobile communications tower was a nightmare for our tech services engineer. But his dream, along with San Isabel Electric’s desire to help get the lights back on, strengthened the co-op.

The mobile tower has increased the co-op’s level of emergency preparedness in the event of future nightmares, which are sure to be lurking in the years to come.



# [ WE ♥ OUR MEMBERS ]

