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Cutting Trees to Protect Energy

As Kentucky and Tennessee struggle back to normal after the Jan. 27th ice storm, utility companies say their tasks would be even harder without their sometimes controversial policies for trimming trees. Urban utilities saw far fewer and shorter power outages than rural areas, but both credit aggressive tree trimming with mitigating those losses. Several said areas where trimming had lagged were in worse shape than those that saw zealous application of lateral trimming, or directional trimming - removing all of a potentially troublesome limb back to its base.

Bowling Green, KY Municipal Utilities saw a combination of snapped poles, fallen trees and broken lines that knocked out power to 1,280 customers altogether, but never more than 500 at a time, according to Miles McDaniel, BGMU's manager of Business Development & Marketing. Calls started coming in at 2:30 a.m. Jan. 27, and within 23 hours all power was restored, he said. For that fast turnaround, he credits the utilities aggressive cutting. Since the preemptive policy began in 2005, tree-related power outages have dropped more than 65 percent, McDaniel said.

There is no question that had it not been for our tree trimming program, BGMU customers would have experienced outages that would have lasted for days, he said. The situation is much tougher for Warren Rural Electric Cooperative Corp. That utilities manager of contracting, Don Cole, was still in the Leitchfield command center Thursday with other managers, seeking to restore service to about 9,000 customers who were still without power. That's down from 30,000 a few days before, but the broad stretch of Warren RECCs service area made the task difficult compared to compact urban utilities like BGMU. We are mostly rural. We have eight counties that we serve, Cole said.

About half of the outages were caused by falling trees, with most of the rest being brought down by the weight of ice on the lines alone, he said. Most of the trees that fell on Warren RECC lines were outside their designated right-of-way, but were tall enough to bring down power lines anyhow, Cole said. We have really been aggressive on our tree trimming policy over the last five years, and it paid off during this storm, he said. Bad as it was, could have been much worse.

Warren RECC crews go through their rights-of-way on a rotating five-year schedule, and those that had been cut most recently suffered the least damage, Cole said. We try to get 10 to 20 feet of clearance on each side of power lines, but heavy ice combined with subsequent ground softening due to rain brought down some lines despite that, he said. Some of those that were on their fourth year, where we hadn't gotten to them yet, we did see greater devastation in those areas, he said. You cannot prevent, or even build for what we endured, he said. There's just no way you can, but with the proper tree trimming philosophy and efforts, you can minimize the damage.

Two weeks after the storm knocked out power to much of Kentucky, officials say a total of 41,645 outages remain across the state. The number of outages peaked at about 769,000 at the height of the storm.