

# Weather reduces Liberty Utilities' reliability

By Kathryn Reed

Flip a switch and the lights go on. In the 21st century in the United States we expect that same outcome every time.

But the reality is there are circumstances beyond the supplier's control that cause the power to go out.

Weather is the No. 1 reason Liberty Utilities customers find themselves in the dark. Equipment failures, traffic accidents, animals on the lines and loss of power from NV Energy are other factors.

Liberty supplies electricity to the California side of the basin, Truckee and just north of there, and Alpine and Mono counties. The 1,476-square-mile service area encompasses 50,000 customers. The bulk of its power comes from Las Vegas-based NV Energy.

New for this year the California Public Utilities Commission is mandating companies under its purview host reliability reporting workshops in its service area. Liberty did so last week in South Lake Tahoe and Kings Beach.



A broken pole this winter in the Ward Creek area took out power to Alpine Meadows ski resort and area residents. Photo/Liberty Utilities

The goal is for customers to not experience more than 160 minutes' worth of outages in a year. In 2014, Liberty customers were in the dark on average 352 minutes and for 2015 it was 357 minutes.

Customers should expect 1 to 1.2 outages a year. In 2014, the average was 2.4 outages and 2015 it was 2.01.

"We are trying to push to have better restoration time," Travis Johnson, vice president for Liberty, said.

The delay is often in finding the problem, not actually fixing it. There isn't some magic board at headquarters that pinpoints where the broken pole is, or what line is down, or which wires slapped together. Linemen need to find the problem and then assess how to remedy the situation.

Still, the company recognizes it needs to better communicate with customers what is going on. Instead of its website just listing the counties affected, the plan is to make it more

detailed. Better estimated times for restoration are also being talked about.

Living in snow country and having equipment in remote areas only compound the potential for problems in the winter.

A large swath of the West Shore was in the dark for days earlier this year. Plows won't clear roads with wires on the ground. Unplowed roads make it difficult to reach the problem. Helicopters were used to lower workers to sites; this, after the weather cleared. At times crews were trudging through waist-high snow, at 3am, with temperature at zero degrees, all while carrying heavy cables and other equipment.

Some lines had snow accumulations the diameter of a basketball.

Utility companies operate with redundancies so when one transmission line goes down the system can still function. This winter two lines were down from Emerald Bay to Portola. Then a tree took out the third line.

"We are in uncharted territory of what our system has seen before," Johnson said. He pointed to a diagram showing the Tahoe-Truckee area trending toward precipitation levels well ahead of 1982-83.

Exacerbating the problem is that customers from Emerald Bay to parts of Tahoe City are on one circuit.

Jeremy Vanyi with Liberty said the plan this summer is to modernize some of the equipment and to put in devices that would mean fewer customers being affected by the same outage.

Bright spots in the reliability spectrum include Liberty's praise for phase one of the 650 electric line on the North Shore. Steel poles instead of wood means they can stand up to the wicked winds that blow through the area. Plus, trees were adequately thinned to ensure they didn't fall on the new line.

Liberty is also experiencing fewer short-term outages, which it attributes to having done more work to remove potentially problematic trees or limbs.

The two worst circuits for Liberty are in the Woodfords-Markleeville and Coleville-Walker areas. This summer the company will work on both areas to improve reliability.

Work this summer in South Lake Tahoe will involve the continuation of undergrounding cables along Pioneer Trail.