



Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative (OTEC) employees Mike Chase, manager of engineering, left, and Anthony Bailey, manager of accounting and finance, center, meet with Werner Buehler, OTEC's new general manger.

A Passion For People

New OTEC general manager brings wealth of experience and a desire to serve

By Debby Schoeningh

Werner Buehler literally worked his way up from the toilet bowl to the board room in the electric utility business.

"I started cleaning toilets in Roseburg at the local utility co-op there when I was a junior in high school," says Werner, Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative's (OTEC) new general manager. "I got so good at it that I was promoted to washing trucks!"

Werner worked his way through college building power lines, and graduated in 1976 with a degree in journalism. Even though his inter-

ests revolved around writing at the time, he also took a business course in utility management.

After college, he decided to put his writing aside and pursue the business of electricity.

What he soon discovered, though, is the real current flowing through his veins is a passion for people.

"I like the people business," Werner says emphatically.

OTEC is one of the largest utility co-ops in Oregon, and he will have ample opportunity to pursue his passion.

Werner was the general manager of Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative

before taking the OTEC position in November.

His experience in all facets of the business from janitorial work to being on the line crew to his management positions have given him a unique perspective of the ins and outs of a utility co-op.

"I think we made an outstanding choice," says Peggi Timm, an OTEC board member who was on the committee that selected candidates for the job. "I called people I knew and respected in the industry, and every time Werner's name came up, he was highly recommended.

"He also brings something important to OTEC, and that's a very

positive attitude,” Peggi says. “Our goal is to have a co-op that serves the needs of all of our members and employees, and I think he will help us continue to achieve that goal.”

Tour of the Facilities

During his first week on the job, Werner visited the OTEC district offices in Burns, John Day and La Grande. In doing so, he says he developed a real appreciation for the geographic distance OTEC serves.

“When you take that into consideration and look at the elements and conditions and the quality of service we are receiving, we can’t be matched,” he says. “They have more outages in Portland than we do here.

“Pacific Power, the largest utility in the state, has no public office. You can’t stop by and pay in person. You can’t visit them face to face to work out a problem. At OTEC, consumer service is a priority. That’s what the members want. Everyone is a stakeholder—everyone has skin in the game.”

Werner says he feels fortunate to come into a company that has had good management and has made good decisions in the past.

“I think the OTEC board and management have done a marvelous job of running this utility,” he says. “They had absolutely zero equity when they started in 1988, and now they are sitting above the 50 percent equity level. Members own half of this business.

“When you look at the size of this machine (OTEC) that delivers power to the people, it’s kind of a wonder that we can do it. This is us, the local people, and we’re doing it and doing it well. I’m kind of humbled by it—being able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people who made this happen.”

Eye on the Future

The largest issue Werner will tackle this year with the OTEC board is deciding where OTEC’s wholesale power will come from for the next 20 years.

Historically, OTEC has purchased all wholesale power from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA).

“OTEC has been fortunate all of these years to benefit from Bonneville’s cheap inventory of hydroelectric induced power (Tier 1 power),” Werner says.

BPA has provided power up to its existing generation capacity at the cheaper Tier 1 rate, but has now reached its Tier 1 capacity.

Northwest public utilities will have to purchase additional power at higher, market-based rates for any local load growth in the future.

For OTEC, the purchase of additional power could come from BPA’s

Tier 2 wholesale power program, but OTEC will research other options to ensure it negotiates the best deal for OTEC members, Werner says.

Another consideration is the law the Oregon Legislature passed in June 2007, which requires co-ops the size of OTEC to meet 5 percent of their electric load with new renewable energy sources by 2025. OTEC will need to consider, possibly in conjunction with Tier 2-type power, the purchase of renewable power from sources such as solar, wind or biomass.

“We will communicate as much as possible with members while researching and making this decision,” says Werner, noting a survey will be sent to OTEC members in the near future.

Gary Miller, OTEC’s board president, believes Werner will be beneficial in helping with this tough decision.

“Werner has knowledge of the issues facing us in the future and a great deal of knowledge about what’s going on now in the industry,” Gary says. “He’ll help us decide what is best for our consumers. This issue will involve a lot of discussion, and Werner is a good people person.”

Committed to the Community

Having been in the electric utility business in some capacity for nearly 38 years, Werner says the most notable aspect of change to him has been in the dependency on electricity.

“When I was working on power lines in college, we ran lines to people who were getting electricity for the very first time,” he says. “I remember one time we worked all day on a tap line to get power to a home—the first time the family had ever had it. We finished up about dark, and they invited us (the line crew) to a neighborhood potluck, complete with fiddle playing. They had a celebration!

“Today, it’s expected. It’s something people count on and depend on every day. It’s a whole different concept.”

Technology has grown during Werner’s career. He says it’s something he will research with the possibility of implementing more technology into OTEC’s system.

“More technology, not for technology’s sake, but technology that will net us a savings,” he says

Werner, wife Nancy and son Luke, who is a high school freshman, have settled in at Baker City, the co-op’s headquarters. Their eldest son, Jacob, is a student at the University of Oregon.

Werner expects to spend some of his free time on his hobbies, which include backpacking, fly-fishing and cross-country skiing. But he also plans to carry on the OTEC tradition of community involvement, and looks forward to volunteering at Baker High School as Luke gets involved in sports.

“You can’t live in a rural community and not become a part of it,” he says. ■

