

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE MUTUAL ASSISTANCE



August 2022

Introduction

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) is the national trade association to representing nearly 900 local electric cooperatives and other rural electric utilities. America's electric cooperatives are owned by the people that they serve and comprise a unique sector of the electric industry. From growing regions to remote farming communities, electric cooperatives power 1 in 8 Americans and serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56 percent of the nation's landscape. Electric cooperatives operate at cost and without a profit incentive. NRECA's member cooperatives include 63 generation and transmission (G&T) cooperatives and 831 distribution cooperatives. The G&Ts generate and transmit power to distribution cooperatives that provide it to the end of line co-op consumer-members.

America's Electric Cooperatives provide electric service in 364 (92%) of the Persistent Poverty Counties identified by the U.S. Treasury Community Development Financial Institutions Fund (CDFI). More than 250 distribution cooperatives and NRECA-member public power districts serve an estimated 4.2 million people in these counties, with poverty rates ranging from 20% to over 60%.

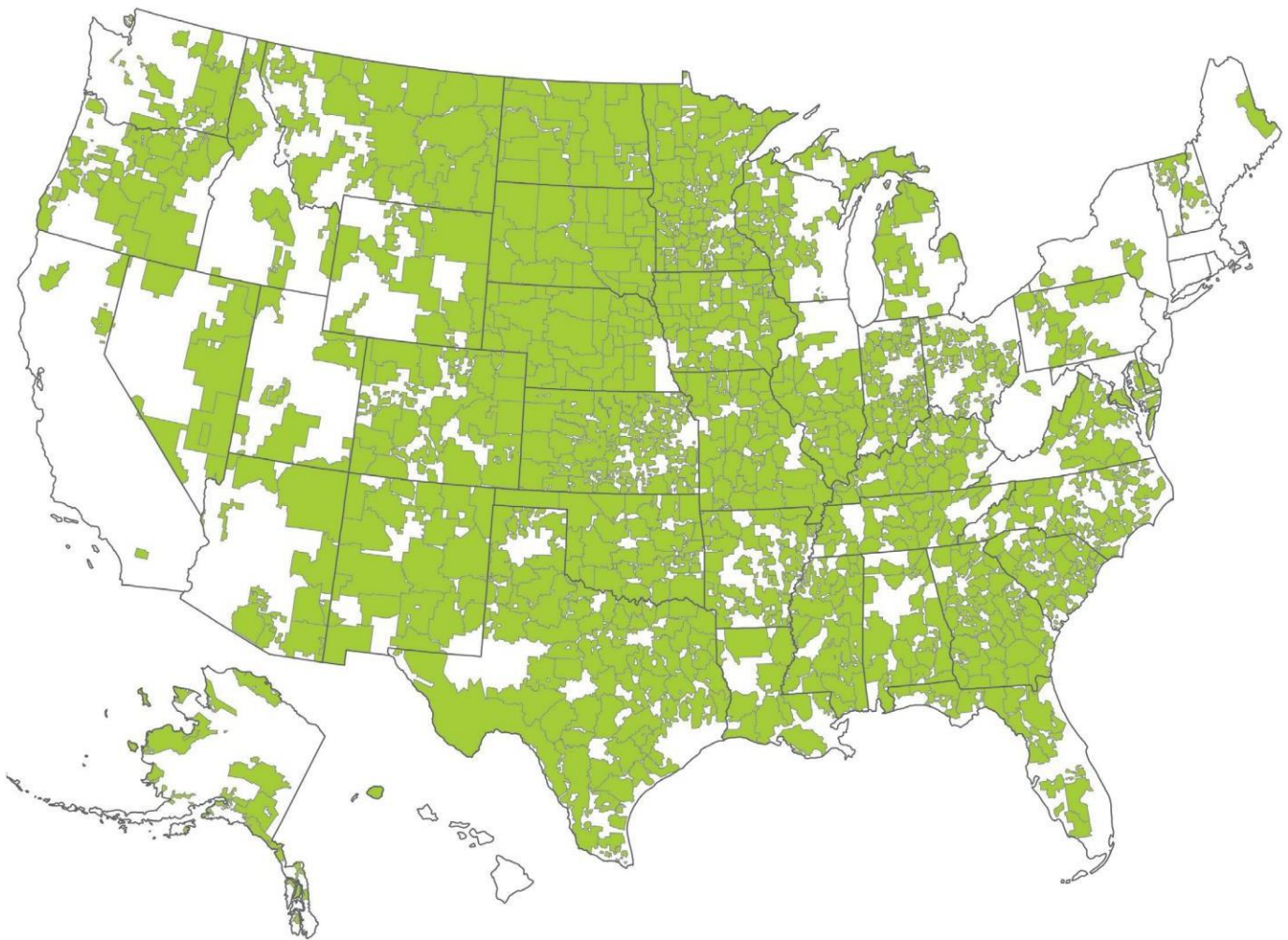
Electricity is not a luxury. It is vital for business and an essential element of modern residential life. For isolated rural residents, reliable electricity service can be a matter of life and death.

In 38 of the 45 states in which electric cooperatives operate, statewide associations ("statewides") serve as a forum for its electric cooperative members – both distribution and G&T cooperatives – to exchange information and ideas, a platform for coordinating activities and programs such as mutual assistance, and as a unified voice that speaks to the general public, regulatory bodies and state legislatures on behalf of their members. These associations are voluntarily supported, governed by representatives of the member cooperatives and offer commonly desired services. These statewides are in turn members of NRECA.

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Electric Co-ops of the United States



Electric Cooperative Mutual Assistance

Electric cooperatives, like all other cooperatives, operate according to seven principles.¹ Principles 6 and 7 (Cooperation among Cooperatives and Concern for Community) are most relevant to the concept of Mutual Assistance. From the very beginning of the rural electrification program in the 1930's, electric cooperatives have relied on other cooperatives to assist in times of disasters.

Disaster response and mutual assistance is executed and managed by NRECA members. Coordination is provided by the statewide organizations (see Disaster Rhythm chart) — statewide storm coordinators manage the coordination between states and cooperatives in need and states and cooperatives providing personnel and equipment. Because the national network of transmission and distribution infrastructure owned by electric cooperatives has been built to federal standards, line crews from any co-op in America can arrive on the scene ready to provide emergency support, secure in their knowledge of the system's engineering.

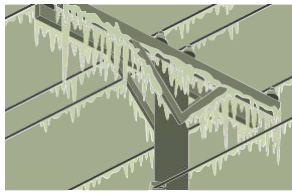
In the early 1990's, NRECA, its members, and the American Public Power Association (APPA) and its members developed a Mutual Assistance Agreement. This Agreement was developed in coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and is an important aide in the electric cooperative Mutual Assistance Program. Mutual assistance is encouraged by FEMA regulations, by the National Incident Management System that provides the framework for disaster response across the country, and by FEMA policy.

Electric cooperatives (and municipally owned electric systems) are eligible for Stafford Act funds administered by FEMA. The damages suffered by electric cooperatives are included in the damage assessment that forms the basis for the affected Governors' request for a federal disaster declaration. Therefore, electric cooperatives work closely with FEMA, and state emergency managers to perform an initial damage assessment. Electric cooperative personnel from statewide organizations are situated in the state Emergency Operations Centers during disasters and maintain close communication with other disaster relief organizations as disasters occur and mutual assistance is activated.

Beginning with Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the statewide organizations in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi began to meet annually to discuss and plan for mutual assistance. Over the years, other statewides have joined the group and the statewides began to develop a more formalized approach to manage mutual assistance.

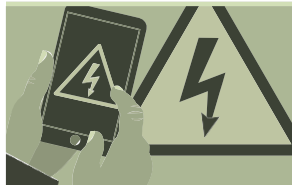
¹ These principles are: 1. Voluntary and Open Membership. 2. Democratic Member Control. 3. Member's Economic Participation. 4. Autonomy and Independence. 5. Education, Training and Information. 6. Cooperation Among Cooperatives. 7. Concern for Community.

Disaster Rhythm



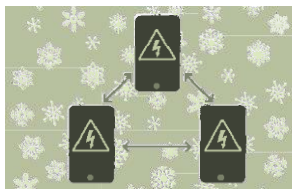
Step 1

Increased awareness of incoming storm.



Step 2

State(s) that may be impacted call for a pre-event conference call.



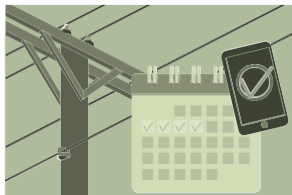
Step 3

Pre-event conference call is held to develop situational awareness.



Step 4

Daily conference calls are held to report on the situation and discuss needs for crews or equipment.



Step 5

As disaster abates and electric service is restored, conference calls are decreased and crews begin to return to their homes.

Annual Mutual Assistance Meeting

In addition to regular communications during disasters, the statewide associations meet in August to discuss issues in mutual assistance and to plan for the upcoming storm season. Recent meetings have included presentations by FEMA and DOE's Emergency Support Function #12 (ESF-12) staff. The group has also developed software to further automate the movement of personnel and equipment during a disaster.

Disaster Response Plans and Exercises

Individual co-ops and statewide organizations develop, maintain, and exercise emergency response plans on a regular basis to ensure that all is in readiness when a disaster strikes. Annual meetings of statewide emergency response personnel are also held to review the lessons learned from the prior years' disasters, and also to plan for the year ahead. In February 2022, NRECA and the National Association of State Energy Officials ("NASEO"), with assistance from the U.S. Department of Energy, sponsored the first national electric cooperative tabletop disaster exercise.

NRECA’s Role in Mutual Assistance

NRECA’s role in mutual assistance is one of coordination, not operation. NRECA provides staff support to cooperative CEO members of the Energy Sector Coordinating Council and participates in DOE ESF-12 coordination calls during disasters.

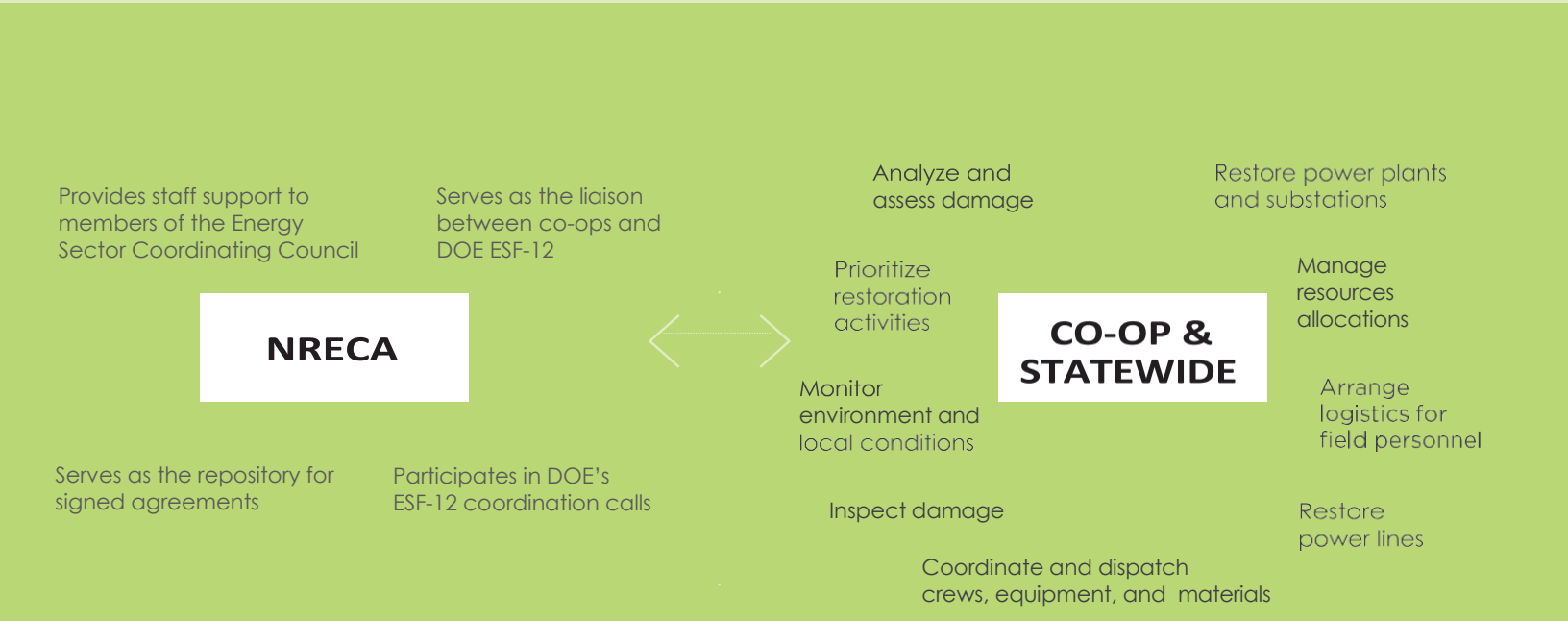
As discussed above, NRECA makes available a model mutual aid agreement that meets FEMA policy requirements. NRECA encourages all cooperatives to

sign the model agreement and to update signatories as applicable. In addition, NRECA serves as the repository for the signed agreements and maintains a list of signatories.

NRECA staff attends the annual Mutual Assistance meeting hosted by the statewide organizations.

Finally, NRECA serves as the liaison between our members and DOE ESF-12.

ROLES OF NRECA & CO-OP/STATEWIDE



Mutual Assistance in Action

In 2022, electric co-op emergency coordinators and their state counterparts participated for the first time in a tabletop disaster response exercise.

NRECA Pioneers Dual-Disaster Tabletop Drill with Co-ops, State Officials¹

What would happen if a polar vortex plunged thousands into icy darkness in the Northeast and then, after electric cooperatives in the central U.S. sent mutual aid, a 7.7-magnitude earthquake hit along the New Madrid Fault that stretches from Illinois to Arkansas?

That's a scenario that emergency, safety and energy coordinators from 22 electric cooperative statewide associations and their state government peers wrestled with in Fractured Freeze, the first tabletop exercise of its kind. The drill was organized by NRECA and the National Association of State Energy Officials.

NRECA CEO Jim Matheson welcomed more than 50 participants, including two U.S. Department of Energy officials, to the exercise recently in Arlington, Virginia.

"This is an excellent example of where folks can put their heads together and better prepare for the future because, let's face it, your job is not getting any easier," Matheson said. "At NRECA, we want to find the best way to convene everyone; to find opportunities to facilitate discussion and implementation of ideas."

Roundtables of co-op and state officials tackled power restoration and recovery from the two make-believe disasters that created harrowing circumstances for mutual aid crews, including shortages in gasoline, accommodations and supplies along with damaged roads, bridges and other critical infrastructure.

"Dual disasters like those in Fractured Freeze may not be that far-fetched as weather and environmental conditions become more extreme," said Martha Duggan, NRECA senior regulatory affairs director. "This exercise allowed electric co-ops to face two catastrophes in a safe place, polish their strengths and develop bonds with state officials that will be crucial when disaster strikes."

¹ "NRECA Pioneers Dual-Disaster Tabletop Drill with Co-ops, State Officials", by Cathy Cash. Originally published March 22, 2022 on [Electric.coop](https://www.electric.coop)



Ben Bolton, senior energy programs administrator at the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, facilitated the exercise and shared his experience from 11 natural disasters in his home state over the last two years.

“You can’t have a massive outage without it affecting rural co-ops or the state energy office. Both get involved in different ways,” he said. “We need to increase our cooperation. This is a first great step to build that bridge between rural co-ops and state energy offices.”

Co-op participants said Fractured Freeze provided significant benefits:

- New state emergency contacts.
- Opportunities to educate state officials on the co-op model.
- Relationship building with other co-op statewide associations.
- Reinforcement of the need for timely recordkeeping for reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- New resources and techniques for disaster recovery.

Co-op officials said the exercise gave them a blue-sky chance to fill the void in their state connections.

“It was a good idea for NRECA to have this exercise and invite state officials,” said Rob Land, vice president for risk management and training at the Association of Missouri Electric Cooperatives. “It helps to develop a working relationship before a disaster strikes.”

Peggy Dantzler, vice president of loss control and training for the Electric Cooperatives of South Carolina, echoed the significance of the exercise in establishing these relationships. “Co-ops need a person at the county or state emergency level so communications can happen more accurately and more quickly,” she said.

Co-op leaders also were eager to share with state officials how co-ops operate and coordinate to restore service through mutual aid agreements.

“The exercise really opened up their eyes to how much territory we cover in a state,” said Joe McElroy, safety director at the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association. “They also have a much better idea on how we all work together in the real-life disasters. In that respect, the exercise was worth its weight in gold.”

Even veterans of massive natural disasters found the exercise valuable. Discussions drew new ideas to expedite recovery, like contacting park services when chainsaws are needed or the state tourism department to secure housing for crews. State and public officials also can help identify large empty parking lots for staging and tent cities.

“We exercise our storm muscle quite a bit,” said Addie Armato, CEO of the Association of Louisiana Electric Cooperatives. “When you’re in the heat of it, you’re strictly focused on your industry and your particular needs. This exercise allowed us to come together and have a better understanding of the big picture and not just tunnel vision we have when we get into recovery mode.”

Electric Cooperative Statewide Storm Coordinators and the Annual Biloxi Meeting²

In August 1995, three years after Hurricane Andrew tore through the southern U.S. and devastated its coastal communities, co-ops there were still rebuilding and sorting through a maze of federal reimbursements and other paperwork left in the storm’s wake.

Amid the difficulties, and knowing that the next Andrew could be right around the corner, a handful of the region’s newer statewide safety and loss control directors got together in Biloxi, Mississippi, to see if they could find a better way.

That small, informal meeting would continue every August thereafter and eventually expanded to a consortium of 20

statewide associations. It’s still an informal gathering, with no name or charter, but the work they do has serious implications for co-op preparedness when disasters strike.

“The conversations focus on large-scale mutual aid challenges and how members of the co-op network respond,” says Martha Duggan, NRECA’s senior director of regulatory affairs.

“It gives the statewide storm coordinators an opportunity to talk about what worked well and what could have worked better, and it also provides a chance to plan for disaster-related challenges that we’ve learned to accept as certainties.”

² “Mutual Aid Planning and ‘The Biloxi Meetings’”, by Derrill Holly. Originally published October 1, 2020 in Rural Electric Magazine.

The value of face to face

That first Biloxi meeting involved safety and loss coordinators from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Florida joined the following year.

After Andrew – a devastating Category 5 storm that cut a massive swath of destruction mainly through Florida and Louisiana – co-op rebuilding efforts brought more than 700 mutual assistance personnel to the region. Affected co-ops spent years sorting through reimbursement issues with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and coordinators began to see that unprecedented mutual aid challenges could not be managed in the same way as routine outages that required only a few days help from neighboring co-ops.

What those founding members also realized was that while the regular contacts among co-op peers are critical, it's the deeper personal connections that help in building broad, long-term plans.

"There's something about sharing a meal with someone and having face-to-face conversations that helps to build trust," says Gerald Gordon, vice president of safety and loss control for the [Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi](#). "When we need to talk about complicated challenges in the midst of a crisis, we already have solid relationships and a lot of confidence in the information we're getting from others on the conference call."

The meeting has continued to be in Biloxi ever since, with the exception of 2005 and 2006, when damage from hurricanes Katrina and Rita forced them to move it, and this year when COVID-19 forced its cancellation.

Hurricane Katrina, which slammed into the Louisiana coast on August 29, 2005, and Hurricane Rita, which made landfall near the Texas-Louisiana state line three weeks later, were the greatest tests of the group's then-10 years of work. The twin storms brought thousands of co-op staff and contractors to the region and led to more than four months of intensive mutual aid operations.

"Between the two storms, nearly 10,000 co-op personnel and contractors were involved, so it was a pretty long process," says Mike Bergeaux, the recently retired director of loss control for the [Association of Louisiana Electric Cooperatives](#). "We would not have been able to rotate crews in and out and deal with some of the other widespread challenges without the coordination and planning that occurs at those meetings."

Availability awareness

As safety and loss managers for their statewide associations, many of the meeting participants also coordinate safety training for their member co-ops. They know the crew chiefs and most of the operations employees who are likely to volunteer for mutual assistance work, and they're also familiar with the infrastructure and operational environments those crews most often encounter.

"We have some awareness of what's available in a state beyond the limits of a local co-op," says Peggy Dantzler, vice president of loss control and training for the [Electric Cooperatives of South Carolina](#). "With the help of our contacts in other states, we can broaden access to skills, equipment, and supplies that can really make a difference following major disasters."

According to Dantzler, the Biloxi meetings offer opportunities to discuss things like changes that might affect interstate transportation or issues surrounding transmission access. The result: less time spent on basic issues when emergencies occur.

"When our conference calls take place related to anticipated events, we've often been able to arrange for several states to send out emergency transportation waivers that co-op crews will need to reach their destinations, avoiding costly delays," Dantzler says.

Also addressed are local or regional circumstances that might affect the level of available mutual aid.

"We know that Louisiana's co-ops can often field about 80 people, and Missouri is a state with a lot of resources, so they have committed about 300 when needed," Bergeaux says. "Statewide coordinators have awareness of what each state can comfortably offer and what types of vehicles, equipment, and other specialty gear they can temporarily release without disrupting local or statewide operations."

Shared expertise and technology

Over the years, the Biloxi meetings have also helped build consensus around the adoption of technologies that not only help co-ops during major restoration efforts but also improve response to local outages.

When he was vice president of safety and loss control for the Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi, Michael Weltzheimer helped develop software applications that many statewide associations now use in incident management for outages requiring mutual aid.

"Requesting help is as simple as logging in and telling us what the anticipated need is," says Weltzheimer, who is now safety and loss prevention resource coordinator for [Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange](#). "With the names and skill sets of employees, and the equipment in reserve or available for temporary release already in the database, responding co-ops can quickly offer details on the help they're able to provide."

As co-op technology has improved, meeting principals also got involved in development of applications to help guide visiting crews and contractors.

"Crews traveling across seven states to get to where they're needed can face climate conditions they're not used to," says Larry Detwiler, director of loss control, safety, and compliance at [Kansas Electric Cooperatives](#). "They need to

know what types of supplies like seasonal clothing could be needed ... awareness of the hazards they might be facing, particularly if they are working in terrain and weather conditions they are not really familiar with."

The annual August meetings often include discussions about equipment availability, including portable substations, drones, and mobile mechanic shops. Software developed with encouragement from the group allows for tracking and assignment of crews and equipment. But protracted mutual aid efforts covering multiple co-op territories often require more than line crews, bucket trucks, and digger derricks.

"We've found ways to include warehouse people, administrative staffs, and operations managers and communicators in our scheduling app," Detwiler says. "Knowing that qualified, committed staffers who understand how co-ops operate are available can give beleaguered managers the comfort to allow key staff ... to see about their own families and take necessary breaks."

And as more co-ops recognize the value of direct dialogue with members through social media, communicators who can step in remotely are being added to mutual aid rosters, says Joe McElroy, director of safety for the [Michigan Electric Cooperative Association](#).

"Co-ops are doing much better jobs getting information out when storms occur," he says. "So supporting those efforts when the affected co-ops' staffers need a break just makes sense."

But as the technology available to electric co-ops and their members has improved, potential mutual aid needs have also expanded. Recent statewide storm coordinator meetings have included discussions about sharing incident details through social media outlets.

"Our outage information sites provide more information explaining to members the challenges we face with big outages," Mississippi's Gordon says. "What they don't see are the features that allow us to use the co-op-facing side of those apps to manage crews."

Instead of stacks of legal pads and note slips piled on desks at various locations, crews are assigned, deployed, and monitored in real time, and anyone who needs to track their locations or status has access to the same information.

"That mapping data can be shared with the co-ops and contractors sending in crews to help," Gordon says. "We can tell them to log in to a mobile device, enter a job code number, and they have instant access to useful details."

The disaster response software shared among the statewides also helps track vehicle mileage, personnel hours, equipment use, and other details included under mutual aid agreements, says South Carolina's Dantzler.

"When a co-op has to complete paperwork for FEMA reimbursement, it's clear what was charged for personnel

and equipment," she says. "That kind of detail not only helps the co-op but also helps provide details that save co-ops money."

COVID-19 changes

When COVID-19 pandemic concerns arose in March, statewide storm coordinators began holding weekly conference calls. They also held teleconferences in late June focused on ways to alter mutual assistance practices to meet the demands of social distancing and risk mitigation.

"The discussions centered around transportation, lodging, crew assignments, crews' desires to stay closer to their homes, and how meals could be prepared and distributed," NRECA's Duggan says. And an expected FEMA policy shift from housing evacuees in emergency shelters like gymnasiums and armories to hotels could reduce room availability for visiting crews.

"Several statewides have already adopted travel restrictions requiring that mutual aid crews limit work to their home states or to areas where return to home each night is feasible," Duggan says. "When distances are far and housing is needed for responding crews, they will be housed in individual rooms, rather than two per room. Room service is avoided, as is room cleaning to reduce the need for hotel staff to visit rooms."

Practices adopted to promote social distancing, including the addition of leased vehicles to fleets to reduce the number of personnel traveling to worksites together, are also being included in large-scale mutual aid plans. And instead of communal meals, boxed meals are now being delivered to crews.

"Many managers have already expressed concerns about sending crews where they'd be required to stay overnight," says Gordon, who dealt with the issue when more than 40 tornadoes ripped through his state Easter weekend. "When you have to disperse crews and handle most communications electronically, it can slow the pace of restoration, but it helps reduce the risks."

Statewide officials have also discussed ways to scale up dispersed supply and scheduled fueling operations by staging materials in the territories of neighboring co-ops when big jobs are underway in storm-ravaged areas.

Still, pandemic issues affecting mutual assistance may lead to longer restoration times, which may lead to consumer-member dissatisfaction.

"We've got to make sure members understand that crews may be traveling more and spending less time on restoration, so some of the work could take longer," says Kansas's Detwiler. "These changes affect every aspect of mutual aid because visiting crews may never actually make it to the headquarters or district offices of the co-ops they're helping. Restoring power safely means keeping the crews doing the work safe too."

