

Employees' Safety Record— A Look Behind the Numbers

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South Mississippi Electric employees have reached a remarkable record of 3.5 million man-hours worked without a lost-time accident – a period of more than 6 ½ years. According to Roy Foster, job training and safety manager, the record is not only outstanding, it ranks among the best in the industry.

“The record is something that each of our employees should be proud of,” said Foster. “Due to the nature of the utility industry, our employees find themselves in potentially dangerous situations each day. Not many utilities have a safety record comparable to ours. Safety is not an option for us; it is something that we expect.”

Foster and Security Coordinator Don Ganas oversee the programs and training that help employees stay mindful of the importance of safety in the workplace as well as at home.

“Just this year we started a safety slogan contest that we will repeat every quarter,” said Foster. “The contest encourages employees to take a more personal role in ensuring the safety of everyone in the Association. We had a great response during the first quarter and are very pleased about the excitement that the contest generated.”

The slogan contest was initiated by the Safety Committee, which is composed of employees from across the Association. The committee meets regularly to discuss different challenges and opportunities faced by employees. Many of their ideas are passed along at employee meetings.

The goal of every aspect of the safety program, said Foster, is to provide employees with resources necessary to make safe decisions.

But what does safety really mean to the employees of South Mississippi Electric?

“It is our number one priority,” said Operations and Planning Director Steve McElhaney, whose responsibilities include overseeing the control center. Located at the headquarters facility, the control center is the central location for all system operations—including safety.

“It is our responsibility to keep the company and its assets safe,” McElhaney said. “We coordinate operations in the field as well the output of our generating facilities. So far we have had no significant incidents, but we must always be prepared to react in order to minimize any danger to our crews and the public.”

All activity conducted across SME's 1,700+ miles of transmission lines must be coordinated, approved and performed by one of the twelve system operators who work shifts around the clock. The key to safe operation is clear and timely communication.

“We follow an echo-protocol when communicating with the crews,” said Gary DeFatta, system operator. “Each command is repeated to make sure that the message was received correctly. The echo-protocol makes sure that both the crewman and the operator are on the same page. A simple mistake in communication could cost us a life.

“The protocols we follow prevent our employees from being injured on the job. We take everything step-by-step to ensure that orders are given and received correctly. The effectiveness of these protocols can be seen in the fact that our outside transmission and engineering personnel have worked more than 2 million man-hours without a lost-time accident – that is a span of more than 20 years. The crews know what it takes to make safe decisions and they follow through, but it is definitely a team effort.”

Communication between the system operators and the line crew is important not only for personal safety, but also for the overall reliability of the transmission system.

“We are always thinking ahead,” DeFatta said. “Everything we see and react to is happening in real time, so there is no room for error. It is a constant balancing act to predict and match the demand for power while keeping the employees and the communities we serve safe. At the end of the day, everyone deserves to go home to their family.”

Maintaining the Association’s safety record is also viewed as a personal challenge for each of the maintenance mechanics at Plant Morrow.

“From toilets to turbines, we do it all,” said Billy Perkins, mechanic I. “When something goes wrong, we are there to fix it. We take that responsibility very seriously because we know that everyone else’s job is affected by how well we do our job.”

Mechanical Maintenance Foreman Doug Hartfield said that safety is a primary concern for the mechanics because of the environment they work in every day.

“These guys are always around rotating equipment and they work in very loud, dangerous places,” Hartfield said. “We have a mix of very experienced mechanics and some with little experience.

Mechanics like Billy who know the work very well are always on hand to guide the newer guys who are still learning the ropes. We operate on an accountability system. It is everyone’s responsibility to look after each other.”

Joe Renot, mechanic II, said the key to being safe is to always be aware of the surroundings. “Before we start a project, we talk about the possible hazards. You cannot look only in front of you, you have to look at what you might trip over and what could possibly fall on you.

“Each time I work on something, I think about the guy on the other end,” said Renot. “There is much more at stake than just keeping the plant running—it is about the people who keep the plant running.”

South Mississippi Electric and its Members also benefit from the immense accomplishment of employees’ safety performance. For workers’ compensation policies, companies are given an Experience Modification Rating (EMR) that compares its annual losses in insurance claims against its policy premiums over a three-year period. Insurance providers view companies with a low EMR more favorably, which results in lower insurance premiums on workers’ compensation coverage.

The standard rate for workers’ compensation policies is adjusted by the EMR which is initially set at 1.00. An unfavorable safety record will cause claims to rise with a corresponding increase in the EMR factor above 1.00. Similarly, a favorable safety record will result in fewer claims and a lower EMR factor. Anything above an EMR of 1.00 will increase the premium cost a company must pay, while anything below 1.00 reduces the premium costs. In 2008, SME earned an EMR of 0.56.

“This is virtually unheard of,” said Jeanne Walker, treasury analyst. “Having an EMR so far below the standard rate makes a significant impact on our workers’ compensation premiums. Because of our outstanding safety record, we receive a 44% discount on the standard premium rate. Last year we saved approximately \$327,000.”

“While the milestones of millions of hours are extraordinary and very important,” said Jim Compton, general manager/CEO, “I am equally proud of what the records reflect—that our employees are committed to living, thinking and ensuring safe behavior in all they do. Our Board of Directors and management appreciate that more than anything.”