

Ameren prepares for possible weather outages

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
January 13 2017 9:30 AM





ALTON - With the forecast this weekend predicting a possibility of as much as a quarter inch of ice, crews from Ameren Illinois are preparing for the worst, but hoping for the best.

Ameren Illinois Communications Executive Brian Bretsch said preparations have already been made across the Metro East to ready both Ameren crews and contractors to deal with whatever is coming. He said Ameren Illinois has been monitoring the weather forecast for the past several days and has put its crews on alert - meaning they have created preparation packs with warm clothes and supplies to last as long as five days.

"It gives them enough time to let their families know they may be out of town, and also make backup plans to stay with relatives or friends in case the power goes out," Bretsch said. "We also have made sure our equipment is gassed up, prepared and ready to go."

Workers are told to prepare for long stays in case workers are required to stay in hotels or other living arrangements during the process of repairing possible storm damage. Bretsch said as many as 250 people working for Ameren Illinois were on alert in the Metro East, and they are being aided by a reserve of as many as 650 contractors including utility workers and tree trimmers.

If the weather forecast is especially daunting, Bretsch said a determination may be made to open an emergency operating center in Decatur, which he described as a "very well-orchestrated logistics plan to get people where they need to go." That center will work with crews across Ameren Illinois's approximately 44,000 square mile coverage area to get local crews to areas most in need.

Bretsch said Ameren Illinois customers are the company's best source of updates regarding downed wires and other problems. During the storm, people are asked to contact Ameren Illinois at 1-800-755-5000 with any information regarding outages, downed wires, pole top breaks and any other utility-line or power-related incident.

Severe winter weather can cause power outages and line damage in a variety of ways. Bretsch said power lines are designed to accommodate as much as a quarter inch of ice (which is possible under current predictions), but added winds could add to the calamity and possibly even cause pole top breaks.

Ameren Illinois has worked to be proactive in an effort to prevent future utility line damage and pole top breaks. Bretsch said an initiative to increase tree trimming along power lines took hold in 2012, and has helped to prevent wayward branches from causing as many power outages from both winter and summer weather hazards.

"Back in 2012, we developed a robust tree trimming policy," he said. "All of our tree trimmers are certified arborists. We tried to go into all of our communities for tree trimming for both ice storms and summer storms."

Besides tree trimming, Bretsch said Ameren has also replaced several traditional wooden utility poles with fiberglass poles - most recently near Homer Adams Parkway in Alton. Bretsch said placing a fiberglass pole every fifth or sixth pole can prevent a disastrous "domino effect," which has been known to occur when a wooden pole top snaps and takes as many as nine or 10 with it when it falls. Bretsch said the fiberglass poles are as much as five times stronger than normal wood poles.

"For the past two years, we've been adding fiberglass poles to 'storm harden the system,'" Bretsch said. "We are really ramping up that part of things. They can withstand heavier winds, and are designed to stop that domino effect. Only three or so poles may fall before a fiberglass one stops it. They are also designed to have some flexibility in the wind and are able to withstand more pressure from the ice."

The biggest concern of Bretsch and Ameren Illinois is public safety, he said. Bretsch warned against people approaching any downed or sagging utility lines they may see during the storm, and to treat all wires as if they are energized at all times.

"Just assume all downed wires or wires hanging low are energized," he said. "If you see a downed wire, seek shelter and contact us at 1-800-755-5000. We encourage people, if the weather turns out to be as predicted, to please stay indoors, especially if the power is out."

Bretsches also said some fallen lines may be hidden under precipitation or vegetation. He said customers should keep that in mind during the storm in order to ensure their safety as well as the safety of Ameren employees and contractors.