

# Local Linemen Explain What They Do at Ameren Illinois

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MARYVILLE - Following a stormy summer, local linemen explain their jobs at Ameren and how they work to restore power after bad weather.

Linemen install and repair electric lines throughout the year, but their job has additional risks after heavy rain or snow. When storms knock out power across the region, a crew

will work a 17/7 schedule — 17 hours on, seven hours off — until it's restored, often taking them away from their families for days at a time. The job itself is intense, but many linemen agree that they wouldn't want to work anywhere else.

"It's very hard and demanding and rewarding at the same time," John Dowell, a crew leader with Ameren, said. "To see that expression on people's faces when we get the power back on, that's the best part of it."

But getting the power back on is often a lot of hard work. Linemen usually have to climb utility poles so they can repair the primary wires or transformers at the top. They might be able to use a bucket truck, but it can be difficult to move the truck close enough to the pole, especially when a right-of-way easement is narrow. In that case, they strap on their 15-pound toolbelt and climbing equipment and hoist themselves up the pole using a harness and steel shanks strapped on the insides of their ankles.

Before they can climb the pole at all, though, they must first perform a "hammer test" to make sure the pole is steady enough. A lineman hits the hammer against either side of the pole close to the ground, where the wood is most likely to rot. Sometimes, the hammer will go through the pole altogether. If this happens, or if the resulting sound is hollow, they can't climb it. If the pole is sturdy but leaning, they'll climb on the higher side and hold on tight.

This is why constant communication is necessary between the lineman in the air and the one on the ground, who uses rope to send up tools. That same rope can be used to bring the lineman down if they get injured while at the top of the pole. In addition to the risk of falling, linemen are working with live electricity up to over 10,000 volts.

"Electric wants to find ground," Dowell explained. "It's going to take the path of least resistance, so your body will be it."

To reduce the risk, linemen are as covered as possible. Long-sleeved shirts, vests, hardhats, goggles and cut-resistant gloves protect them at a job site.

When they're working with electricity, they'll also wear insulated rubber gloves or sleeves that cover them from elbow to fingertip. Dowell noted that a tear the size of a pinhole in a glove is all it takes to get electrocuted, so linemen test their gloves before every use to make sure they're safe.

The heavy outfit is mandatory no matter what the temperature is, but the weather still plays a big role in a lineman's day. They're outside and in the air even when it's storming, freezing or burning hot.

“The coldest I’ve ever been was with my gloves and sleeves on, and the hottest I’ve ever been was with my gloves and sleeves on,” one lineman laughed. He has worked as a lineman since he was 17 and added that a windy day is “a lot less pleasant,” as a big gust can make the pole sway.

Linemen might stay on a pole for 30 minutes or six hours, depending on the repairs they need to make. Ameren’s linemen have spent most of the summer in the air, fixing damage caused by storms. With the 17/7 schedule, they might be able to go home during their seven hours off, but it’s often not worth the drive; instead, they find a hotel (which is usually also unpowered) and catch a few hours of sleep before another 17-hour shift.

With this in mind, Brian Bretsch, the communication executive for Ameren Illinois, wants people to understand how hard his linemen work. He noted that he often receives calls from people who complain that they saw a lineman sleeping at a site while the region’s power is still off.

“Well, they’ve probably been out for 12 hours,” he said. “People come to me and say, ‘My power has been off for four days.’ And I say, ‘Mine too, and I haven’t seen my family in four days, either.’”

It’s certainly not an easy job. But as Dowell said, it can be rewarding, too.

“I’ve left my house when my power was out to go fix other people’s power,” Dowell said. He shrugged, then pointed to the bucket truck, where one of his linemen was working 55 feet above the ground. “But depending on where you are, you can see some amazing views.”