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BROADLANDS

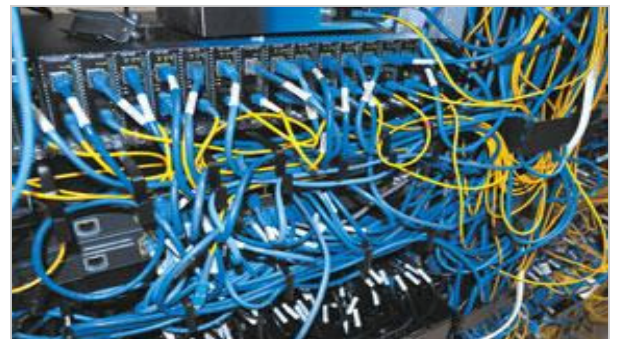
Electric co-op keeps rural Southeast Colorado at forefront of high-speed broadband Internet

By ANTHONY A. MESTAS
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN



LA JUNTA — Southeast Colorado Power Association was formed 70 years ago to bring the rural area out of the dark. Today, the electric co-op also keeps the region wired in a whole different way. Starting in the late 1990s, the co-op began rolling out one of rural America's first fiber-optic broadband systems to boost Internet services and other communication services. The network linked schools and hospitals and libraries but also gave homeowners and businesses access to broadband Internet even before some urban areas. "We couldn't get anybody to build out here for electricity in the 1930s. And we were unable to get broadband out here in the 1990s. So we did it ourselves," co-op CEO Rich Wilson said. The service area comprises all or parts of Crowley, Otero, Las Animas, Bent, Prowers, Kiowa, Baca, Cheyenne, Pueblo, El Paso and Lincoln counties. Homeowners' monthly rates for broadband range from \$19.95 to \$44.95, depending on the speed of the service. Businesses' monthly rates range from \$52.95 to \$72.95. Wilson and other executives recently talked about the startup of the venture. The co-op was first formed in 1937 by landowners eager for electricity. Until then, the region was like many rural areas: off the power grid because of the expense traditional utilities faced in building transmission lines across vast reaches of open land. The co-op borrowed low-interest loans from the government to build the lines. Today, "We serve about 12,000 square miles of territory," and about 10,000 electric customers, Wilson said. In the late 1990s, the company boldly moved ahead with plans to also connect the region to the Information Superhighway. The co-op created a subsidiary, SECOM, to oversee the work.

Today, the percentage of U.S. farms and rural homes with high speed Internet access varies wildly from state to state and county to county. But in Southeastern Colorado, most people are connected, thanks to SECOM's more than 1,200 miles of fiber cable running through the region. The venture began when Southeast, fearing power deregulation would put the co-op at risk of competition from an outside utility, started exploring ways to diversify its product offerings. "We were advised by several people that we needed to diversify and to start getting into other businesses," Wilson said. That led the co-op to explore broadband cable and high-speed Internet access. About the same time, Colorado contemplated a grand experiment of extending Internet to rural areas. "As luck would have it the state chose Southeast Colorado as a pilot site to do that," Wilson said. The co-op partnered with Otero Junior College in La Junta to develop a project. "School officials saw that we had radio towers around our system. We use them for our two-way radios in our trucks," Wilson said. "They told us they would like to try and utilize the towers for a wireless connection like microwave so we could connect to schools in Eads, Lamar, Granada, Walsh, Las Animas and other towns."



CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/ANTHONY A. MESTAS -- A panel of fiber optic cable connections.

The idea was to connect the small towns with the college in order to offer college-level courses over the Internet to the schools. "We saw the distances between towns and it became very evident that it was going to get very expensive, very quick," Wilson said. "So, like rural electrics do, we looked at the model and saw that we had linemen that can hang fiber and that we had the technical expertise to maybe do this stuff." In 1998, Southeast and the state partnered to build a 36-strand backbone fiber cable from Pueblo, east through the Lower Arkansas Valley and to Walsh, Springfield, Pritchett and Campo. "We added Edison School, which is halfway between Yoder and Pueblo, and we added Plainview east of Eads," Wilson said. The early network was designed to serve 22 rural school districts, three hospitals, eight libraries and four Colorado State University extension agencies. "We invested about \$4 million of our funds into that and the state of Colorado invested about \$2.8 million for the project," Wilson said. The network also was extended to the Colorado Springs area. "Our primary goals were to get all the school districts, the hospitals and libraries connected, but the staff saw a bigger opportunity to develop a business with the fiber." The company began selling Internet services to homes and other businesses. It also kept expanding its service territory. "We now have a presence in the city of Colorado Springs and we have greatly expanded in Pueblo with numerous fiber sites in town and in Pueblo West," Wilson said. "We provide for schools in Pueblo West and in the (Saint Charles) Mesa," Wilson said.

**Jack Wolfe****Jon Saunders****Rich Wilson**

Jon Saunders, general manager for SECOM, said the company added additional fiber cable going into each community. "The reason for diversity is to have a backup," Saunders said. "If a fiber cable somehow gets cut it will switch and run on the other alternate path. It immediately changes and people don't even know it's happening," Saunders said. Jack Wolfe, chief operating officer of the co-op, said the added infrastructure "greatly improves our reliability." The company also built a line of fiber cable from Pueblo to Trinidad to connect school districts in Walsenburg, Aguilar and Trinidad. Beyond the schools, "We also work with local businesses in Trinidad and the Trinidad State Junior College," Wilson said. Elsewhere, "We also are, obviously, doing business with Lamar Community College and OJC (Otero Junior College) as well as (Pueblo Community College) and Colorado State University-Pueblo." Saunders said SECOM also offers point-to-point data circuits that connect banks in different towns through a direct fiber circuit. "We were one of the very first Ethernet (data transmission technology) providers in the world. We started that in 1999," Saunders said. The company also offers high-speed communication devices to rural hospitals. Said Wolfe, "Telemedicine is booming. The hospital in Lamar can take imaging and send it to Colorado Springs and a radiologist can read that information quickly from miles away." Added Saunders, "They can send images around the world for specialists to look at instead of a patient traveling hours for treatment." For schools, the benefits are varied. As one example, Wolfe noted, the technology allows small eastern towns to share teachers with interactive televisions in classrooms. "A Spanish teacher can sit in a classroom in Pritchett and teach students in Wiley or Eads. Kids can interact as if the teacher was in their classroom," Wolfe said.

Going forward, the company is moving to add Internet telephone services and plans to expand on its product line in the next couple of months. The company also plans to expand its fiber cable footprint into Cheyenne Wells. Wilson noted the company has grown from nothing in 1999 to earning about \$3 million a year in revenue today. "We continue to grow. Our intention is that every opportunity we are going to expand. We want to

utilize this asset to its greatest extent," Wilson said. Currently, SECOM employs 17 full-time workers with 16 based in La Junta and Rocky Ford. Several of the workers are certified technicians who graduated from Otero Junior College. The venture put Southeastern Colorado at the forefront of the broadband, the executives said.

"In a time where a significant number of areas in Denver couldn't get broadband, down here there was a choice of five different providers. We were way ahead of the curve," Saunders said. Said Wolfe, "Our mission has never changed. If they don't have it we will help them try and get it."



SECOM and its parent, Southeast Colorado Power Association, share office space in La Junta.