

Concord Monitor  
Sunday August 12, 2007

# VIEWSPOINTS





CHARLOTTE THIBAUT / Monitor staff

LEMPSTER

# A human connection

## There's something oddly comforting in a real, live pole-tester

By DEBORAH STONE

For the Monitor

**O**n a recent Tuesday morning, a man trundles down the dirt road in front of our house, hauling a golf cart to which is attached a plywood box. In the box sits a small, shiny, royal blue machine with a long silver handle. In all my years of monitoring the road from my study window, I've never seen a gizmo like this. I fear the man is about to spray herbicides around the utility poles, so I grab my camera and go outside to investigate.

"Hi. How ya doin'?" I say to the man, who, sure enough, is now standing in the brush around our electric pole, looking semi-official in his iridescent green safety vest over a white T-shirt. "What's up?"

"I'm from the New Hampshire Electric Co-op. I'm testin' the poles and feedin' the bugs," he replies. I watch as he lifts the blue machine out of the cart, places it at the base

of our pole and secures it to the pole with a strap.

"Mind if I take a photo for our town newsletter?" I ask. He must feel like he's being swarmed by a particularly pesky two-legged insect. I clamber up the hill, shove my camera through the leaves, zoom out the camera's proboscis, which makes a whining sound all too reminiscent of a mosquito, and snap away. All the while I'm asking questions, and Steve Thompson, a perfect gentleman, answers them with a smile and gives me a lesson in utility pole maintenance.

The Co-op, it seems, is testing its poles for strength. The machine inserts two metal prongs into the wood and measures moisture content and fiber strength. Steve shows me how, after he has tightened the strap, he pushes on a long handle, rather like a pump handle, which forces the prongs into the pole. In a few seconds, he repeats the process to get a second reading from another place on

the pole. Then he brings the machine back out to the road, looks at his electronic meter, and he's done.

"How'd we do?" I ask.

"This one's 81 percent," he answers. I haven't a clue what that means. Is our pole stout, on the verge of collapse, or somewhere in between?

"I'm a teacher," I say, "and 81 percent would be a B-minus. Is that about right?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "We don't worry until they get down around 50 percent."

**1K-over-8**

"So I guess this one's good for a few more decades," I conclude. Steve nods.

I have no idea how old "our" pole is, but it's been here since 1980 when I moved in. I remember calling the Co-op to establish service, and the person on the other end of the

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phone asked me the number of my pole. Why, live and learn, I thought. Utility poles have identities? Where I come from, a Boston suburb, utility poles were part of the landscape, not individuals with their own numbers. The Co-op person explained to me where I'd find the number. Since then, I've felt a special kinship with 1K-over-8.

On this morning, now that I've just learned that 1K-over-8 is in good health, I am curious about the health of my neighbors' poles. "What's the range?" I ask. Are you finding some at around 50 percent?"

"Ninety-five percent of them are good," Steve says reassuringly. "We occasionally find a broken one, but hardly any that are rotten."

"How often does the Co-op do this?" I ask.

Steve tells me that this is the first summer with this machine. It seems to be a new technology. That's all he and a partner have done all summer, going to every town the Co-op serves. They started in Enfield, have been through Sunapee and several other towns. I ask whether they measure every pole or just a sample.

"Oh, no, we do every pole," he says. I imagine a big crew for this job, but Steve tells me it's just him and the other guy.

### The human touch

It struck me that although the blue box was apparently a high-tech innovation for the Co-op, the process of monitoring the poles is distinctly low-tech, what with a person visiting each and every

pole. At the state hearings in Concord this year for the small wind power plant that will go on Lempster Mountain, we learned that the turbines will be monitored almost entirely electronically. Once Iberdrola, a Spanish energy company, builds the 12 400-foot-tall turbines and the plant is up and running, human presence will be minimal.

Electronic sensors will be built into each turbine to measure every aspect of its operations. The sensors will transmit information over the internet to the company's computer center in Spain. There, computers will store the information, and presumably will be programmed to send up a red flag if one of the measures is out of whack. At some point during a malfunction, one hopes, the computer's red flag will bring a human being into the process.

Evidence presented at the hearings revealed that the potential mishaps with a wind turbine are quite different from what can go wrong with a wooden utility pole. Turbines are made of steel and, to make sure they catch as much wind as possible, they're placed to stand as the highest object around. How do you spell lightning rod? A lightning strike could not only knock out the electronics but also set the few hundred gallons of lubricating oil ablaze, sending fumes down the mountain. If lightning or a mechanical failure breaks one of the 140-foot-long blades or any part of the turbine, the propeller can hurl huge, thousand-pound fragments, effectively launching unguided missiles. These dramatic disasters are a far cry from slow

rot, or even a 40-foot wood pole toppled by a storm.

According to the company's testimony in Concord, the project will have "one or two local employees." Whether it's one or two, how many hours a human will be on site, what they're trained to do, whether they'll cut brush, monitor local computers and tweak the turbines' innards, or pay daily visits to the turbines—all that is still vague.

Reflecting on all this, I find the thought of two human beings walking right up to every utility pole comforting. In the process of taking a machine reading of characteristics invisible to the human eye, they see and touch each pole and get a quick feel for its stability—whether it's leaning dangerously, cracked or obviously decaying. Even better, they check the meter while they're still at the pole. If anything's amiss, they'll notice and report it.

But then, I remember, human inspection lacks something in constancy, to say the least. And what good is human intuition if it's not at the scene?

### Man or machine?

Later, I called the Co-op to learn more about this pole inspection business. Seth Wheeler, a communications administrator, told me that the Co-op owns more than 80,000 poles. The two men they hired are hoping to inspect 8,000 this summer. That makes for a human look-see about once every 10 years.

This is the dilemma of modern technology. Computers can gather information constantly, store it, and spit it out in vast reams. But

all the information in the world doesn't help us if we don't know how to interpret it or, worse, don't look at it. That's why I stopped giving my husband a shopping list. Even if he remembers to look at it, how's he supposed to know what kind of cereal I mean or what counts as a vegetable for me? We lived together for over a year before we figured out that for him, the essential vegetables are onions, peppers, and mushrooms, while to me, a proper vegetable must be green, and if it's Brussels sprouts or broccoli, there won't be any debate. Like shopping lists, computer data are only as good as the sense people make of them.

Living in a small town, seeing a stranger walk right up to your trusty K1-over-8, and being able to chat with him about what he's doing, you can't help but appreciate the virtues of good old-fashioned, face-to-face communication. I suspect that's why many people in these parts are a bit nervous about the wind project.

Almost everyone I know supports wind energy. Everyone understands that life is full of tradeoffs, that with every good you get some bad. What gives many people pause is the fact that the project is owned and managed by a large, multi-billion-dollar European company. If something goes wrong in Lempster, who besides a computer will notice? Whom will we talk to? Who will care?

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