

# Keep the Motors Runnin'

Mechanics  
Hold Important  
Role in Co-op  
Operations

Story and photos by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

Behind every working light bulb in your home is a good mechanic. The correlation may not be abundantly clear, but consider this: When linemen are called out to restore or connect service, they do not travel by foot. They need fully functioning equipment, not the least of which is the vehicle to take them to the scene.

Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC) has a fleet-management program operated by four full-time mechanics, who are assigned to maintain about 150 vehicles and 70 pieces of equipment. Lead mechanics Ron Whetzel and Don Biller, and mechanics Mark Dillashaw and Scottie Armentrout, bring more than 100 years of combined experience to work each day.

Their central garage is located in the Rockingham District office in Dayton, but they are equipped to run mobile to each of SVEC's four other districts — Winchester, Luray, Mount Jackson and Staunton — at any time.

"We could be anywhere on any given day," said Whetzel, the department supervisor who has worked at SVEC since 1999.

Through a rotation, one of the four mechanics is stationed in Winchester each week, working four 10-hour days to assist with what is the Co-op's largest district fleet.

"The more vehicles you have," Biller said, "the more problems you're going to have."

## 'Behind-the-Scenes' Appreciation

A large portion of the mechanics' workload is preventive maintenance, ensuring all of the Co-op's vehicles are safe and dependable to operate when called upon for duty.

"SVEC takes a tremendous amount of pride in providing a well-equipped fleet for the employees here," Manager of Distribution Systems Ben Cash said. "We have well-trained employees in all areas and it is the responsibility of these mechanics to make sure we have safe and reliable transportation for them to complete the task."



Mechanic Mark Dillashaw (above) joined the Co-op three years ago. Department supervisor Ron Whetzel (below) has worked at SVEC for 18 years.

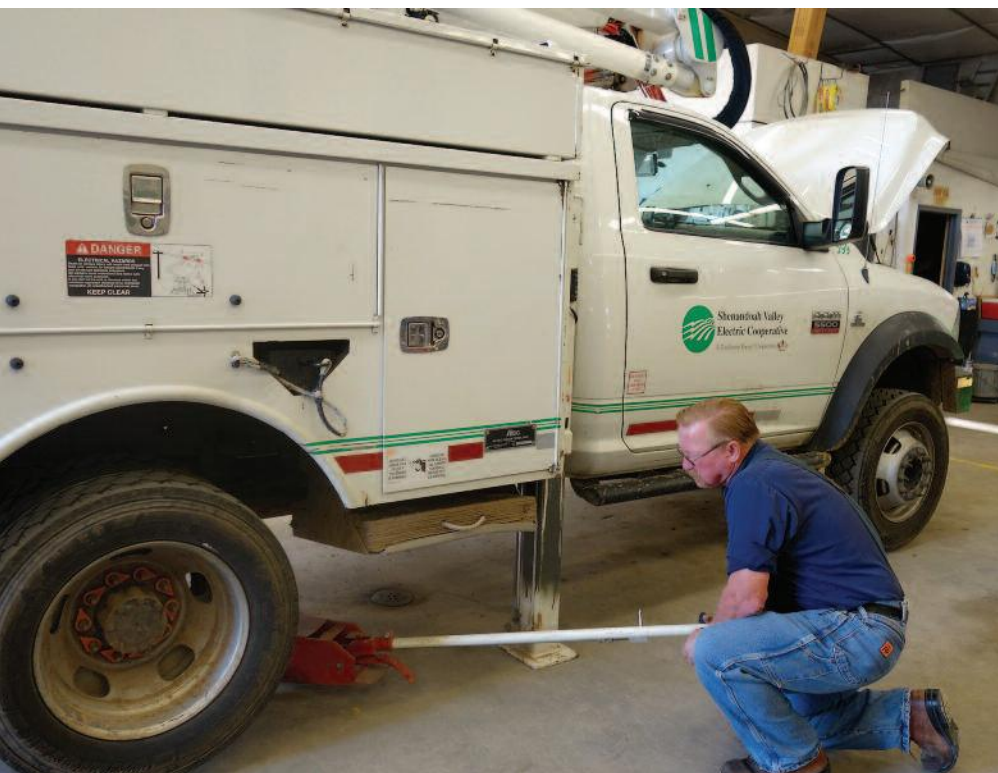
"Our mechanics take pride in providing exceptional service to our employees that provide service to our member-owners. This group of employees is a lot of times 'behind the scenes,' but much appreciation should be passed on to keeping us 'rolling.'"

Different circumstances arise every day, so the mechanics must be "versatile" and able to respond to any of those needs, Dillashaw said.

"We don't have spares. If [a vehicle] is down, it's top priority," he said. "As far as mechanics jobs, it doesn't get much better. When you're dealing with utility line equipment, there's always something to work on."

This is related to the nature of a lineman's job, not to mention the terrain of the Shenandoah Valley. Co-op vehicles are constantly twisting and turning, even navigating such obstacles as sinkholes, to reach certain areas, whether it be for a service restoration, general maintenance or new construction project.

In the case of a restoration call, it's obviously easier to address a problem at a pole using a bucket truck, as opposed to climbing it. But the brunt of the wear and



tear does not simply disappear. It just moves from the human body to that of the vehicle.

“It is a challenge. They go through some pretty rough places,” Whetzel said. “There’s no wonder that there is a lot of work [for us].”

### On-the-Job Training

Before acquiring parts of Allegheny Power’s Virginia territory in 2010, SVEC employed two mechanics. The acquisition nearly tripled the Cooperative’s membership — while also expanding its footprint as far west as Highland County and north to Winchester and Frederick County — and two mechanics from Allegheny joined SVEC to make it a department of four.

Those two employees have since retired and been replaced by Dillashaw and Armentrout. Biller has worked for SVEC for 13 years, while Whetzel, in addition to 18 years at SVEC, has a résumé that includes working on utility vehicles since 1974.

A lot of the work is on-the-job training and learning from each other, the mechanics say. Whetzel said Dillashaw and Armentrout excel at troubleshooting issues related to the growing computerization of vehicles, an area in which he jokes that he and Biller are “dinosaurs.”

“If you pay attention, you can pick up on it,” Biller said. “In this line of work,



Don Biller (above) has been an SVEC mechanic for 13 years. “In this line of work, you learn something new every day,” he said. Dillashaw and Scottie Armentrout (left) excel at troubleshooting issues related to the growing computerization of vehicles.

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The size of vehicles — they’re only getting bigger — is a noticeable change in recent years, he said. But the goal for the department has not wavered.

“We have a sense of pride, that we don’t just patch them up and send them out the door,” Whetzel said. “We fix them as right as we can.”

Biller said, “When you get a big storm, they kind of lean on us pretty hard.”

He’s seen it firsthand in more than just SVEC’s service area. Biller has accompanied line crews to Kentucky and South Carolina to assist other cooperatives in restoration efforts following major ice storms.

On these occasions, he logs 16-hour work days.

“It’s a great learning experience,” Biller said. “Overall, it’s a good feeling that you get to help somebody, but it’s pretty tough work. There’s an inch of ice on everything.”

While winter snowfall or summer storms may put the Co-op as a whole on higher alert for potential outages, the mechanics say no season in particular gives them extra pause. The need to keep vehicles running properly is a year-round focus, they said.

Along with service or repair to trailers, cars, bucket trucks, chainsaws and other tools, SVEC’s mechanics also outfit new vehicles with the necessary technology, such as mapping, and all required safety decals.

They strive to always be available, not always knowing what that may even entail.

“Everything can change with one phone call,” Whetzel said.

